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Novelization by John Ryder Hall
Screenplay by Beverley Cross
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Sinbad and The Eye of the Tiger

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Co-Starring
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Jane Seymor
Patrick Troughton
Screenplay by Beverly Cross
Creator of Special Visual Effects Ray Harryhausen
Produced by Charles H. Schneer and Ray Harryhausen
Directed by Sam Wanamaker
Filmed in Dynarama
Production services by Devon Company/Persky Bright

SINBAD and the EYE of the TIGER

Novelization by
JOHN RYDER HALL

From the screenplay by
BEVERLY CROSS

Story by
RAY HARRYHAUSEN
and BEVERLY CROSS


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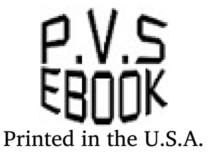
SINBAD AND THE EYE OF THE TIGER

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To the hero in everyone:
you, me, and the one you least suspect

Sinbad and
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CHAPTER 1

The ornate chamber was humming with the talk of nobles and the rustling of their richly embroidered clothing. Dignitaries from far lands, in their distinctive clothing, stood about showing off their finery while ceremonial music was being played in a hidden alcove. From time to time their eyes strayed to the imposing figure of a woman, heavily veiled, dressed in the manner of the court, whose heavily made-up eyes swept the room in an imperious and somewhat disdainful manner.

Few of the men dared to ask about this haughty woman, obviously a noble and just as obviously one of power. Near the richly decorated throne, at the foot of the dais, a bearded ambassador from Europe whispered to an Islamic noble. “Who is that woman? The one whose eyes are . . . are . . .”

The son of Islam’s thin smile split his heavy beard. He turned toward the ambassador so that his lips would not reveal his words to the aristocratic woman across the great hall. “That is Zenobia . . . *Queen* Zenobia. Some think her a witch and . . .”

A gong sent golden waves thrumming in the incense-laden air. A silence fell over the throng and they turned toward the entrance to the throne room. The music blended discreetly into a more dignified tone. The European ambassador gave Zenobia another look and saw her dark eyes sweep over him, pause but briefly on his face, then move on. But it was enough to give the blond and bearded man a moment of quite irrational fear. He stepped slightly to one side, to place a huge ornamental incense brazier between him and the veiled woman, then turned to watch the procession enter.

Musicians entered first, playing their pipes and strings, their golden trumpets and small gourdlike drums, and shaking their silver and ebony tambourines. The European ambassador saw the High Priest enter, haughty and self-important, carrying a bejeweled coronation crown on a pillow of purple silk. The ambassador followed the great crown with his eyes, then looked through the haze of incense at Queen Zenobia. He saw her lean to the side and whisper to a handsome young prince. The young man, thin-faced and lean, looked around, his eyes slitting with cunning alertness. Then he slipped back into the crowd of magnificently robed nobles and disappeared.

The ambassador felt a wave of apprehension. The atmosphere was heavy with intrigue, a far cry from the honest, straightforward intrigues of power in his native country. He sighed to himself, his face a practiced mask of imperturbability and bland interest. He had been posted to this far kingdom because of his supposed knowledge of the Byzantine labyrinths of power-seeking and diplomatic maneuvering in this Islamic country, but the more he saw of these turbaned courts, the less he understood them. There were layers upon layers of meaning and motivation, some going back for generations. Blood feuds and vendettas, regicides and assassinations were used as tools of diplomacy and power. There were even rumors of magic and strange apparitions, but the ambassador chose to ignore them until he had better proof. Not that he doubted these non-Christian devils would use such satanic power if they had it, but he was a pragmatic man who believed only what he saw, and not always that.

He bowed ever so slightly at the passage of the High Priest, as did the other nobles and ambassadors, then straightened to watch the astrologers pass in their odd robes, mixed with the lesser priests and court functionaries. His eyes betrayed the slightest amount of interest as he saw Prince Kassim appear in the arch. His automatic, practiced assessment of the young prince occupied the next few moments. About to be crowned Caliph, Kassim would be the man the ambassador would be dealing with. In the absolute autocracy of this country, it would be the whim of the new Caliph that granted certain trade considerations to the ambassador's country. It was the ambassador's stock in trade to correctly assess the leaders and men of wealth and power in the countries outside his own.

As Caliph, Kassim's immense power could aid the ambassador's country, and even line his own pockets with gold. But disfavor might bring disgrace, even death.

Just as automatically, the ambassador picked out the older, bearded figure just behind Prince Kassim. It was Balsora, the Vizier, the wise and powerful adviser to the throne, who had been vizier to Kassim's father. He carried the mace of state, a heavy and bejeweled symbol of power. Balsora was no fool, the ambassador knew, and wise in the ways of the court. His reputation was great, an honest man with ambitions for his country, but little for himself, it was said. Some said it in derision, disdaining the efforts of any honest man in the courts of Arabia, but there were many who openly admired the old and bearded Vizier.

A light flickered briefly in the ambassador's eyes as he saw the next in the procession. It was Princess Farah, the beautiful, dark-haired sister of Kassim. Even through her veil and expensive jeweled gown it

was seen that she was a great beauty, although the ambassador personally knew little of the highly protected princess. In Islamic nations it was best not to appear too curious about the women, and most especially those of royal blood. The ambassador glanced at the two ladies-in-waiting that followed her, a pair of veiled beauties whose eyes—unlike those of their mistress—sometimes strayed and swept across the throng.

Then the ambasador blinked and his eyes flickered through the incense smoke to where the veiled Zenobia had stood. She was gone, and now walked haughtily at the rear of the procession, with the handsome young prince at her side. Two soldiers, armed and obviously loyal veterans, brought up the rear.

The ambassador leaned forward and whispered to his companion, “Who is that with Queen Zenobia?”

“Her son Rafi,” the noble answered. He seemed disinclined to add any more and the European ambassador stepped back. He watched as the procession came to the throne dais and went to their stations. He saw Rafi glance to the side, near him, and the curious ambassador followed the look, which seemed to have some significance. He saw a man, dressed in rich clothing, but somehow not looking at home in the silks and brocades. His hands were scarred and callused, as few nobles’ were, and the ambassador grew very interested.

Commoners were sometimes elevated to the purple for unusually meritorious service in every country, and indeed, the ambassador thought, many kings had been generals before ascending to the throne. Or there were kings whose fathers or great-grandfathers had been ambitious commoners who amassed the loyalty of an army or the gold of trading and connived or murdered their way to the throne. That a prince had a friend whose hands told more of him than his clothing was no surprise to the ambassador. Such men had their uses, and the ambassador had often employed them himself, though not against his own liege lord. His curiosity aroused, the ambassador edged his way past the incense burner, ducked under a cluster of hanging oil lamps, and moved closer to the throne, stopping behind a carved pillar.

The musicians had joined the others in the alcove, sitting cross-legged on the thick rugs. The courtiers prostrated themselves on the floor before Kassim as he walked the last few steps to the throne dais. They kissed the carpet and tile under them, their voices murmuring, “Peace be upon you,” in a ragged chorus.

The ambassador lost the hard-handed noble in the crowd as they moved to prostrate themselves, but his attention was caught by a one-eyed officer, a lean, dark man with the air of command about him. A

patch covered one eye, but the other eye was as alert as a hawk's. As the ambassador prostrated himself between a turbaned baron and a bejeweled general, he saw the one-eyed officer's hand touch his dagger, as if to verify it was ready to hand. The ambassador's heart began to pound. *Something was up!*

The High Priest, attended by others, ascended the dais and stood by the throne, holding the crown upon a purple pillow. The incense smoke hung in the air like-drifting light as the young prince turned from the homage and mounted the steps to the ornate and ancient throne. Two courtiers behind the prince arranged his long train skillfully, spreading it artistically down the low steps as he sat upon the throne.

The prince, smiling slightly, inclined his head toward his sister Farah, at the foot of the dais. She acknowledged his look with pride and encouragement and the light that shone from her eyes was that of love. The prince then bent his head toward Balsora, the Vizier, in the faintest of bows, the proper sort of recognition given by a king.

Then the prince looked out oyer the heads of the people and the High Priest began the coronation. If he saw Balsora lean over to whisper to the one-eyed officer he gave no sign. The two astrologers moved to the brazier. One lifted the lid and placed it nearby while the other, saying a prayer in the sing-song of priests everywhere, gestured with his ringed hands over the glowing coals.

The coals began to glow more hotly, their light building, reflecting off the bearded faces of the brightly robed astrologers. The incense began to intensify, spreading still more streamers of pungent aroma throughout the great throne room.

The High Priest lifted the crown from the silken pillow, which was taken by the aides. He held it high and a roll of drums filled the high-ceilinged throne room. The High Priest held the crown over Kassim's head and began intoning an ancient oath.

Something made the European ambassador turn his head. At the edge of the dais, partially hidden in shadow, stood the veiled Zenobia. Her eyes burned with such a hatred that the ambassador gasped to himself. He saw her look at the brazier between the two astrologers and his own eyes went to the burning coals.

Smoke curled from it, boiled in gray clouds, wafting over the turbaned and helmeted heads of the throng that stood watching the coronation. The ambassador saw Rafi look from the brazier to his mother, then to Kassim, an expression on his face that the bearded European found difficult to analyze.

The High Priest was intoning a prayer as he placed the crown upon

the head of the prince, anointing him Caliph. As the crown touched Kassim's head a sheet of flame shot from the brazier, startling everyone. They recoiled in fear. The ambassador staggered as the men about him cursed and moved back.

Then a woman's scream sliced through the air.

Balsora gasped. The one-eyed officer drew his dagger and took a step toward the throne, a curse upon his lips. Farah screamed again, a scream that became a throttled cry of incredible fear and loathing. The ambassador was buffeted by the throng, but through a split he saw Rafi, a slight smile upon his face. He looked toward his mother and the ambassador twisted around, then himself gasped in fear.

In the shadows and flickering light Zenobia's eyes seemed like those of a great tiger. The European was certain it was but a trick of the swirling smoke, flickering oil lamps, and the reflections from the gold-encrusted walls of the throne room. But the effect was still startling. He staggered, once again struck by the struggling bodies pulling back from the throne. Through the incense he caught a glimpse of what was upon the throne.

CHAPTER 2

It was night, but the men scrambling over the side of the ship had not been given leave for many weeks. The waters of the bay lapped against the side of the ship and made the small boat bob. One of the last men into the boat carried a small monkey on his shoulder, a present for a woman ashore who he hoped would remember him. His mates had jeered good-naturedly at him for weeks, saying that Aboo-seer's woman would have forgotten all about him, or would more readily take the monkey as her lover than the burly sailor.

They all looked toward the city eagerly. It was an ancient city, its origins lost in time and legend. A crescent moon silvered the bulbous domes and slender towers of Charak and glittered in a long path across the still, dark sea that all but surrounded the high-walled town. The thick stone walls were dark and silent, the mossy edges unseen in the darkness.

A flutter of black night birds passed across the moon as the long boat came toward the jetty. A harsh and sinister cawing cleft the night and echoed off the smooth stones of the main gate. But the tough, good-natured sailors ignored the high dark walls, their eyes on the tent city before the walls. There was a bustle of activity around the cooking fires before the tents. Men were drinking and eating in the company of boldly unveiled native girls. There was the buzz of conversation heard by the sailors as they tied off their long boat and scrambled onto the worn stone jetty. They strode toward the land, grinning in anticipation, hearing the music that came in sinuous waves from the tents.

One man strode ahead of the others, followed by his mates, and from a group of musicians at the head of the jetty came a cry.

"Sinbad!" They waved and the leader of the sailors grinned back at them.

One of the bearded sailors called to Sinbad, "Why the haste, Captain? The city will not vanish!"

The man with the monkey, Aboo-seer, turned to the speaker. "It is not the city of Charak he is anxious to see, Hassan—but someone who resides within!"

Maroof, a muscled black sailor, grinned. "The poet has said, 'Love makes the heart fly!' "

Sinbad looked back at his men. “After a long voyage—” he grinned —“it is good to stretch one’s legs.”

Hassan snorted as they climbed the shore and went into the cluster of low, dark Bedouin tents. “The only good thing in this port is the Inn of Jamil-the-Squint.” He licked his lips. “For six months I have dreamt of his roasted sheep’s eyes . . .”

“. . . and I of the eye of his daughter!” Aboo-seer exclaimed happily. The men laughed and Sinbad looked over his shoulder.

“You dreamt of more than that when you bought her a monkey in Calcutta!” Aboo-seer laughed as Hassan clapped him on the back.

The sailors exchanged greetings with the Bedouins, who called out “Welcome to Charak!” and hailed Sinbad by name. Sinbad strode on, his eyes glancing up toward the dark walls as he left the tents, with some of his men following. One by one the sailors were diverted by the bold blandishments of the women, by merchants and others who offered food and drink. Dancing girls were caught up in the sudden flurry of activity and swirled their way onto carpets spread over the sand of the shore, their hips swaying seductively and the bodies moving in increasingly more erotic movements. The musicians who were sleeping came back to their drums and flutes and soon the entire encampment was a flurry of music and laughter.

Aboo-seer stopped Sinbad as they started up the embankment toward the city walls. “Captain, wait! My mouth is dry—”

“Mine, too!” Hassan added. He gestured back toward the tents. “Let us stop and sample the wines of Charak—”

“My thirst is the thirst of a thousand men!” the black-skinned Maroof said in his deep voice.

Sinbad laughed. “Stop and drink here and I promise you will go no further.” He grinned at them. “Remember the last time?”

He turned away and started up the path again. The others reluctantly followed, casting glances back at the tents where their mates were already caressing the muscled bellies of dancing girls and swilling wine. Hassan laughed at Aboo-seer. “They stripped you of all your possessions!”

Aboo-seer grunted. “Because of that I added four more eunuchs to the population . . . and subtracted another!”

They all shared the joke, often told in the weeks at sea, as they followed Sinbad. But then Maroof stopped. The others glanced back at him.

The black sailor gestured toward the tents and campfires. Over the jingle of dancers’ costumes and the beat of drums he said, “All the

paradise I seek is here!" He gestured them on. "Allah go with you. I shall stay behind."

The other sailors laughed and waved as Maroof turned back. They were approaching the heavy timbers and ornate bronze knobs of the big gate when they heard a rumble of laughter as Maroof joined the others below.

Here, at the base of the dark city walls, there were a few tents, quiet and dark, where Bedouins slept. A few dusty camels sat with imperious heads, looking at the night intruders with lofty and unfathomable expressions. Some mules grazed morosely nearby, disturbed by the night birds' cries and the entry of the sailors into their dark encampment

Aboo-seer grunted. "Why is the gate closed?"

Sinbad looked around, puzzled, glancing up at the stars to tell sailor's time. "Curfew is not until midnight."

A dog appeared, scrawny and wary. It stopped, then slunk its way back into the shadows, its eyes upon the three men. Hassan stepped back and scanned the ramparts above. "All silent . . . and no sentries about."

Sinbad strode to the gate and hammered at it with his fist. His voice, toughened by years on a pitching deck, shouting over thunderous waves and the whine of winds, bellowed out. "Ho there! Captain of the Watch! Open the gate!"

Hassan and Aboo-seer stepped forward to help hammer and to add their rough voices to the cry.

"It is Sinbad," Hassan bellowed. "Friend to the Caliph Kassim!"

Aboo-seer's hard fists thumped the heavy timbers. "And a better friend to the Princess Farah!"

At another time Sinbad might have given the monkey-laden Aboo-seer a friendly cuff for his impudence, but now he was worried. The sixth sense that had so often saved him from harm rang an alarm in his mind. He started to turn even as he heard a voice come from behind.

"Captain Sinbad . . ."

The three sailors turned and all of them had their hands upon their daggers or swords, weapons worn easily and as much a part of them as their clothes.

"You know me?" Sinbad said to the dark figure emerging from the shadows between two tents.

"I am a merchant," the man said in a bland voice. "I hope to purchase some of the cargo you will unload tomorrow." Sinbad saw

his face dimly, a lean, handsome young man. A memory stirred within him, a faint memory of having seen this dark-clad figure before, on a previous visit. Was Rafi his name? Before Sinbad could ask, the youth gestured toward the closed gate.

"No one is to be admitted to Charak after sunset," he said apologetically.

"But why?" asked Sinbad.

"The plague." The young man shrugged. "Many have died."

Aboo-seer spat in disgust, then patted his agitated monkey. "Each time we put into this port some misfortune strikes us."

"Plague!" Hassan said, spitting to ward off the evil spirits.

"The will of Allah . . ." The young merchant sighed.

"The Caliph Kassim and his sister, Princess Farah," Sinbad asked. "Are they . . . ?"

"They are well," the dark-clad stranger said quickly. "But . . . Kassim is not the Caliph . . ." He hesitated, then added, "Not yet . . ."

Sinbad frowned and was aware his hand had not left his sword. "I was told in Jerash that the Caliph . . . Kassim's father . . . died three months ago."

"True," the young man nodded. "But Kassim has not yet been crowned."

Hassan stepped to Sinbad's side and muttered in his ear. "Captain, we had best return to the ship."

Aboo-seer added his assent. "Aye, best to leave and sell our cargo elsewhere."

Sinbad shook his head. "I'm not leaving Charak until I see Princess Farah . . . and Kassim."

Hassan spread his hands. "But . . . but it's the plague! You know I'll face anything a sword can kill . . . but the *plague . . . !"*

Sinbad turned to the young man who had accosted them at the gate. "Is there another way into the town? A sally port? Some secret passage that a few gold coins might knock ajar? A lovers' trysting spot where the walls are low?"

The young Charakian shook his head. "No. But if you wish to take the risk . . ." His voice was hesitant and by his manner he challenged their courage in a subtle fashion. "Perhaps you may enter at daybreak when the curfew is lifted. Until then we can only offer to relieve your disappointment." He gestured toward the tents below. "My tent has wine, food, and music." He bowed slightly, his face hidden in the faint moonlight. "My people are your servants . . . please . . . be welcome."

Sinbad hesitated. He was not unused to strangers offering food and wine in exchange for stories of far lands and exciting deeds. Indeed, he was quite used to it as his reputation grew. He did not feel he was using these hosts, for he offered them something they could never get enough of—stories of wonderment and tales of the far places most of them would never see. He often left trinkets of brass and carved wood, made by the craftsmen of distant bazaars, in payment for their hospitality, and, if the truth were known, for the favors of hot-eyed daughters and sleek serving girls who crept into his tent in the small hours.

The sea captain decided to accept. He returned the bow of the young merchant and then started down the path, back toward the low, dark tents, where laughter and music were heard.

The young man was the last to leave the gate. He looked up toward the gate tower. High above, a cloaked figure watched from a crenellated rampart. The crescent moon grayed the black of the hooded cloak, obscuring both face and form. In the night shadows, on the lonely ramparts, the figure remained unseen to those below. The concealed eyes watched the figures below, silhouetted by the fires of the camp. For a fleeting moment the campfires glittered in reflection on the dark eyes beneath the hood, then the reflection dimmed as the figure moved deeper into the shadows. The eyes still watched, seeing the tallest one, the sailor with the confident air, garbed in a turban and bright sailor's clothes.

The hidden eyes flicked over the others. Hassan, the squat first mate, seemed to sweat despite the cool of the evening, a brawny, muscular man used to danger and hard work. The eyes moved to the third man, caressing a chittering monkey, also dressed in rough sailor's clothing, and humming an ancient tune as they approached the tents.

The figure on the ramparts moved again, and the crescent moon caught his eyes, two feline slits above a dark yashmak that covered the lower face. The blazing eyes turned to look back and down into the small deserted square on the inner side of the city gate.

Whether it was a trick of moonlight or a stray reflection of the fires below, the eyes of the hooded figure gleamed brightly. They seemed to be the eyes of a woman . . . then the eyes of a great savage tiger, feline and evil, a beast of fearsome power and singleness of purpose.

The figure, standing on the firing step for archers, looked down into the square. In the archway of the main gate the bodies of two sentries were hanging. They turned slowly, as their weight stretched the ropes. Their weapons were lying discarded upon the hard-beaten ground. The limp, dead bodies turned, their shadows cast upon the sturdy

wooden timbers of the gate by the sliver of moon.

Below, the young merchant bowed and gestured for them to enter his tent. Again, Sinbad hesitated, glancing about. Sinbad had been approached scores of times by robbers and cutpurses, using darkness as a cloak, and his hand was still upon the hilt of his sword. At his side both Hassan and Aboo-seer were also wary. None of them was stranger to battle, nor to the myriad ways thieves and murderers assaulted their victims. The sly young man bowed again, his cunning smile concealed by his bow. He confronted each of them with a disarming gesture and his smile became one of curious innocence. “Please,” he said, holding open the flap of the tent. He swept back his long cloak in another gesture and the sailors could see he was unarmed. From within the tent came the first stirrings of music and the jingle of the coins that festooned a dancing girl’s scanty costume.

Aboo-seer grinned at Hassan. “Come, you old barnacle! I hear the sound of paradise!”

Sinbad nodded and they all entered, sweeping under the flaps of black felt from which all Bedouin tents are made. The tall sailor had to bend his head to avoid the slanting roof, but once he was seated upon the soft cushions the whole tent seemed in proper perspective.

The sly young merchant clapped his hands and the music increased in tempo. Sinbad, Aboo-seer, and Hassan sprawled on the furs and fine Oriental rugs which were the floor of the tent, and nestled into ornately decorated pillows before a small fire. In back of the tent drummers pounded with facile fingers on their dumbegs and dulcimers, and others pushed air through wooden flutes. The music was fast and erotic, stimulating the two near-naked girls into a more and more erotic dance.

Hassan was delighted. He beat his hands on a pillow to the fast rhythm of the drums and pipes, his eyes riveted to the gleaming torsos of the dancers that gleamed copper and bronze in the firelight.

Aboo-seer tore a chunk of meat with his bare hands, plopping the remnant back onto a platter proffered by a serving girl whose physical assets were all but revealed by her costume and bent-over position. Hassan plucked a plum from a nearby bowl and popped it into his mouth.

“Com, Whin-bawd, smoll!” he said with a full mouth toward his still-somber captain.

“Yes, Captain,” their host urged. “Allow me to give you some, um, better entertainment.” He clapped his palms twice, sharply, over the beat of the drums. Immediately the drummers changed their beat, shifting to an even faster and more erotic beat. Sinbad sank back into

the pillows, grateful for the comfort after weeks aboard his ship. His eyes were on the ripe bodies of the dancing girls, their flesh clothed only in a few wisps of thin Oriental silk and artfully hung strands of coins and ornaments of silver and gold. The jewelry gleamed and glittered as they danced sinuously around the fire, closer and closer to Sinbad and his men. Their torsos gleamed golden and moist, making Hassan's spine straighter, his smile wide and full of anticipation.

"Ho, Sinbad!" he shouted in delight, his eyes riveted to the swaying bodies of the young dancers. His hands came together in a beat, but the wine cup defeated his clapping. He sloshed more wine as he set down the cup. Sitting cross-legged, almost at the feet of the writhing dancers, he beat out a clapping rhythm in time to the musicians.

Sinbad sipped at his wine and glanced at Aboo-seer, who was finishing his flagon with a greedy gulp. His bushy-browed eyes looked at Rafi, who smiled his oily smile and clapped his hands again.

From the side tent came a Bedouin bearing a copper tray of brass cups and another metal flask of wine. Aboo-seer's hand tossed aside the old bronze cup and he grasped the new flask eagerly. He poured himself a new glass of wine, licking his lips, and set the flask back upon the tray. Aboo-seer barely noticed the Bedouin servant pouring him a cupful. He took it, his eyes still upon the lithe bodies swaying seductively before him, swallowing some of the liquid in a series of quick gulps.

The servant then bowed to Sinbad and handed him a cup of wine, which the adventurer took. Sipping it, he found it too sweet for his taste, but he drank a small bit of it anyway, so as not to offend his smiling host. The drums beat faster and faster, rising toward a pounding crescendo. The dancers whirled like wild dervishes, every portion of their well-trained bodies swaying and quivering and shaking erotically.

Across the tent from the sailors the sly-eyed young man caught Sinbad's look. He raised his cup, saluting the three sailors, and Sinbad, who had only been meagerly sipping the sweet wine, returned the salute. The still thirsty Aboo-seer drained his cup in a swallow, laughed heartily, then choked as a surprised expression struck his face.

The big sailor's cup spilled from his hand, falling soundlessly to the thick rug as Aboo-seer gasped, clutching at his throat with a harsh cry. He fell sideways, his face contorted in pain and his knees rising as he rolled into a choking ball.

Sinbad's foot struck out, knocking the cup from the lips of a startled Hassan. He came lithely to his feet, tossing his own cup into the fire,

where it flared and sent steam into the close, smoky air. Sinbad's sword hissed from its scabbard and the dancers screamed, running from the tent with their hands protectively around their heads. Sinbad, eyes blazing, whirled on the shrinking host of these ill-begotten revels. There was hate in the young man's eyes, but he was wary of Sinbad's sword.

The adventurer shouted over the scramble of musicians and dancing girls to get out under the edges of the black felt tent. "Hassan! Help Aboo-seer back to the ship! Then cast off!"

Hassan, tugging the still-writhing Aboo-seer to his feet, looked with a stricken face at his captain. "But you, Captain . . . !"

"To the ship, I said!" Sinbad cried out, his sword swinging before him. "And cast off at *once!* Go!"

The sly young man was circling, stepping over mashed pillows, his own sword coming into his hand from a secret cache like a snake emerging from its hole. His eyes locked with Sinbad's as he unfastened his cloak and let it drop among the spilled wine and discarded goblets. Hassan gave the youth a hard look, then swept a flask of wine into his hand and splashed it into Aboo-seer's face.

"Sober up!" he whispered fiercely.

"Can't . . ." gasped the stricken man. "Not drunk . . . *poisoned!"*

Hassan swore and started pulling Aboo-seer to his feet. The drummers made a rush, daggers and swords swinging, and Sinbad drove them back in a flurry of thrusts, giving Hassan time to get Aboo-seer to his feet. The sly host kicked a pillow at Sinbad, letting the cushion cover his movement as he rushed at Hassan and Aboo-seer.

Sinbad leapt the fire and dodged the pillow, striking down the lean young man's sword. Another rush from the drummers diverted Sinbad and he sent them back with bleeding wounds. The traitorous host thrust his sword once again at Sinbad, but the sea captain swept it aside with a cry. The traitor jumped back a step, looked quickly around him, then his slippered foot kicked at the fire. The burning brands flew toward Sinbad, who managed to dodge most of them and brushed the others from his clothes with the flat of his sword. The pillows started to smolder and burn and in moments the tent was filled with smoke from several small fires.

Sinbad leaped suddenly across the intervening space, crowding his former host, who had only time to get his blade up, stopping but not repelling Sinbad. The tall sailor thrust and parried until his swinging blade cut into the arm of the sly young man, who cried out in pain as his sword fell with a clatter. He moaned in anguish and clutched at his arm, the blood oozing from between his stiffened fingers. He looked at

Sinbad with great round eyes full of sudden fear. He twisted and started to run, but fell over a thick pillow and thudded to the blood-stained carpet with a cry.

Sinbad glared at the drummers, now uncertain, who looked at their fallen leader with apprehension. Hassan and Aboo-seer were on their feet and Sinbad turned his attention to the wounded man on the floor of the smoky tent. He was holding his bleeding arm, his spread fingers begging mercy as his soundless mouth moved. The wretch obviously expected a killing blow from the tall sailor, the sort of death he himself would have dealt out unmercifully to the weak and defeated.

Sinbad stood over him, the point of his sword at the sly traitor's throat, pricking at the vulnerable softness of the fallen man's neck. "Who are you?" Sinbad demanded. "Why have you tried to poison us?"

The wounded man's mouth moved again, but only strangled croaks came from him. Then his eyes moved past and beyond Sinbad. The sea captain heard a gasp of surprise from the cowed drummers and he stepped quickly away from the downed host, his blood-spattered sword coming up, his senses all on alert.

There was a sharp wind and all the lamps flickered out. The scattered coals of the fire made small glows in the smoke-filled tent as Sinbad stared at the hooded figure that had appeared in the entrance to the tent. Its cloak billowed in the wind and there was a moment of silence punctuated only by the hiss of smoldering pillows and distant cries of men.

The hood kept the features of the figure in shadow and Sinbad's eyes searched in vain. He saw a hand emerge from a long black sleeve and recognized it as a woman's. Warily, he saw her hand reach for a necklace around her throat, pulling forth into the light a golden chain from which hung clawlike glass containers. The hairs on the back of Sinbad's neck rose in a nameless fear and his grasp on the sword tightened.

There was a twin blaze of light within the shadowed hood and Sinbad caught the impression of slitted pupils and slanted eyes widening with feline fury, but passed it off as a trick of the flickering fire between them.

The lean fingers of the woman yanked at the chain. It parted and the necklace of claws swayed and jangled, swinging wildly into the firelight. The female hand stretched out, clasping a tangle of chain and claws. The fingers opened, flinging the necklace into the embers of the partially scattered fire.

"Arise!" the figure said ominously. "From the depths of the earth I

command you! Arise!" Her voice was deep and commanding. "Destroy them!" she cried in a sudden change. "Kill Sinbad! Kill! Kill!"

She raised her arms as a priestess might and the flames rose, hissing and flickering. Thick dark smoke billowed, flecked with flames, filling the tent. Sinbad backed away, seeing Hassan drag the Mate, Aboo-seer, to his feet, a sword in his hand.

Then out of the thickening smoke came four nightmarish figures. Sinbad cried out involuntarily. They were of human size but with the horrific appearance of anatomical specimens. They had neither hair nor flesh, only sinew and gaunt muscle stretched thinly over naked skeletal bone. They were obscure parodies of human forms, and Sinbad knew instinctively they were soulless, the ghouls of the hooded figure's incantation.

They advanced toward Sinbad, right through stuttering flames, and Sinbad realized with a shock that they had no feelings and were able to withstand extremes of pain. And they were well armed with axes and clubs.

"Hassan! Aboo-seer!"

"Aye, sir!" Aboo-seer shouted back. "I'm better now. Where's my sword?"

But all three of the adventurers were staring with unbelieving eyes at the four apparitions.

"They're . . . they're not human!" gasped Hassan.

At his words the ghouls reached down and scooped up hot coals and burning brands from the scattered fire. With sudden, abrupt gestures they showered the burning material upon all three of the sailors. Sinbad and his men jumped back, sweeping up cushions to protect them from the rain of burning fire. More small fires were started among the pillows and spilled wine, adding to the smoke and danger of the tent.

The ghouls advanced, their skeletal hands wielding clubs and axes. One or two of them turned toward each of the embattled sailors. The one that came at Sinbad reached into the flames and pulled forth a blazing length of wood. Then the ghouls and Sinbad's men were locked into a deadly battle—a battle in which one side could feel no pain!

The ghoul thrust his blazing timber at Sinbad, who dodged, hacking at it with his sword. The skeletal apparition swung the flaming wood hard, but Sinbad blocked it, throwing his weight behind his sword. Jumping back, Sinbad struck at the fiery lance with all his strength, knocking it from the ghoul's grasp, sending it flying against the sloping wall of the tent, where it started another smoky fire.

The other ghouls were closing in upon Hassan and the weak, but game, Aboo-seer. Axe and club were met with skillfully wielded scimitars and in a sudden thrust Hassan severed an arm from a ghoul. His eyes widened as the skeletal figure paid no attention to the loss of the limb. It merely reached down with the remaining arm and tore the thick club from the clasp of the severed hand and swung it again toward Hassan.

In a corner, obscured by smoke, the hooded woman had moved to stand protectively over the huddled, wounded figure of the youth. Her eyes still blazed, wide with tension, watching the battle with feverish interest.

"To me!" shouted Sinbad, leaping over a mound of smoking pillows. He kicked aside the discarded drums of the musicians, and in a long vertical slash cut open the side of the tent. Hassan and the weakened Aboo-seer struggled through and joined their captain as he drove back the ghouls with a dazzling display of swordsmanship. The smoke was pouring out through the rent in the felt wall as Sinbad's two companions hurried out.

Now all of the inhuman figures were advancing on the lone sailor. Sinbad shot a look over his shoulder. Behind him was a pyramid of sawn timber logs and his two friends were hurrying past it. Aboo-seer was beginning to sag, but kept on gamely.

Sinbad whirled as a club hissed by his shoulder. His scimitar streaked out, stabbing into the ribs of the ghoul with no effect. He raised a boot and kicked out, staggering the attacker with his blow. The ghouls advanced stiffly, their movements awkward and far from the lithe movements of the human they were attacking. But their apparent invulnerability seemed to spell the doom of the swiftly moving Sinbad. They gave forth a triumphant hissing noise as they moved in for the kill, their weapons raised menacingly.

Sinbad jumped out through the slit in the tent and the ghouls followed awkwardly, their clubs and axes and wide-bladed cleavers swinging in tireless blows.

The tall sailor risked another glance over his shoulder. The encampment ended near the projecting quay, a stone pier that jutted into the bay. He could see Hassan and the Mate scrambling into a boat. He dodged another near blow by a sharp-edged cleaver and jumped quickly over a log, running toward the pyramid of timbers.

The ghouls followed him in a silence broken only by the hissing of burning tents and the rattle of their bony passage. Sinbad quickly moved to the base of the log pile, glancing at the advancing figures, ghostly in the moonlight and still murderous.

His scimitar glinted in the light of the crescent moon as he slashed through the ropes that held the pile of logs together. The ropes fell away and the logs began to tumble down. The ghouls did not pause in their shambling rush at Sinbad and the turbaned sailor had only time to jump away before the avalanche of logs thundered past him.

The ghouls froze in their tracks as they realized the danger, but they were too slow in reacting. The logs rumbled over them, snapping brittle, fleshless bones like tinder, burying them under the pile of heavy wood. Here and there a severed leg or arm twitched and tried to move on, but could not.

With a glance back at the smoking tent Sinbad ran down the quay past piles of cargo and was about to plunge into the water when a figure moved out of the shadows. Covered in a sari and yashmak, it came from between bales of merchandise, but stopped as Sinbad's sword swung toward it.

"Captain Sinbad! Wait!"

Sinbad recognized the voice at once. "Princess Farah!" He looked around warily. "How did you . . .?"

She came to his side and touched his arm. "Praise to Allah that I found you! I must talk to you—"

Sinbad looked back at the tumbled pyramid of logs. He thought he saw a stirring in the logs. "Not here . . . not now . . ." he said, pointing with his bloodied blade at the fallen timber.

He gasped as he saw a hooded figure at the land end of the quay, emerging from the darkness. There was a feeling of incredible malevolence about the hooded shape. No stranger to fear, yet a man who preferred to fight what he knew, Sinbad muttered to Farah, "And no going back that way!" He swept her into his arms and she cried out in surprise. "Come with me!" he said and leaped from the quay.

Farah cried out but her voice was stifled by the water as they hit with a great splash. Sinbad started swimming at once, tugging the girl after him, but she started to swim herself and they splashed through the moonlit waters toward the small boat, which had stopped moving away and was waiting for them.

On the quay the figure of the hooded witch stopped moving, and from under the hood there flashed the flickering of twin fires.

Aboo-seer, Hassan, and Maroof helped Sinbad and Princess Farah aboard. The other sailors began rowing at once, their mood caught from the fiery atmosphere of Hassan and Aboo-seer. Farah was breathless and frightened, her thin silken clothes hanging in drenched rags and her long dark hair plastered against her head and shoulders. Her yashmak was gone, but she made no effort to veil her face again.

“What—by all the devils in Hell—*were* those creatures?” Hassan grumbled.

Aboo-seer blew out his cheeks in an explosive gesture. “Spirits of Evil!” he spat. “Hope you never find out!”

Maroof peered back at the shore, his dark face unreadable in the night. “Ghouls conjured by a witch!”

Sinbad peered back through the deepening midnight gloom at the quay. The moon had gone behind a cloud and the shore was dark, with only flickerings of fire from the burning tent. The tent city, so recently filled with music and laughter, was dark and quiet.

“We will make for the open sea as soon as we are aboard,” he said grimly.

“But the shoals?” Hassan said, always aware of the dangers of low tides.

“We shall risk them,” Sinbad said with a hard voice. He looked up. The clouds were moving across the face of the moon and would soon be past. “The moon will show us the channel.”

Aboo-seer grunted. “Better shoals than ghouls that pick up fire in their bare hands!” A shiver of superstitious fear trembled his brawny shoulders and he glared from under his heavy brows at the receding shoreline. Another shiver twitched his muscles. There was movement at the end of the quay. A stray beam of moonlight revealed a hooded figure, standing quietly, looking out at them.

On the mossy stones of the jetty the hooded figure of the mysterious woman stood with a kind of tense stillness. Again, it might have been a curious reflection of the growing moonlight, or something else unknown, but her eyes blazed with hate and anger, fiery almonds of light within the shadows of the hood.

CHAPTER 3

Sinbad's crew helped them aboard, eager to know what had happened, but Sinbad gave them only the most cursory of explanations. Then his voice thundered across the deck. "Hoist the mainsail! Raise the anchor!" The men set swiftly to work as Aboo-seer repeated the order.

"Hoist the mainsail! Look alive!"

Sinbad took the Princess Farah's arm. "I'll see to the Princess," he said and led her below. He paused as she descended the steps to the cabins. He looked back, and the dark figure was still at the end of the quay.

On the moonlit waters of the bay Sinbad's ship turned into the wind and moved gracefully and almost silently toward the entrance to the harbor.

The ship swayed and bobbed, causing some of the cargo in the hold to shift. Timbers creaked and the rush of water past the wooden hull was like the hiss of a hundred tongues. The shouting of the sailors died down as the ship steadied into the wind and moved out toward the open sea. There was the bite of salt in the brisk evening wind. Lanterns had been lit and hung about the deck and from the sailors' cabin came the murmuring voices of men telling the tale of the night's curious adventures.

In Sinbad's cabin Farah looked around, shivering against the chill of the night in her wet clothes. There was only moonlight illuminating the cabin and Farah could see the dark, unlit bulk of Charak behind them, merging into the night sky, barely discernible against the stars. Glints of moonlight came from the tower tops and bulbous minaret domes. She gave a start as Sinbad spoke from behind her.

"Wrap yourself in this," he said, pulling a rough blanket from the bed. "And give me your clothes."

She took the blanket and Sinbad turned away, stirring the faint coals of a brazier into flame. With the light Farah could make out that the cabin's furnishings were few; expensive and beautiful, but simple. There was a plain table, a low bunk, a rack of swords and knives—each a masterpiece of the swordmaker's art and for use, not show—

and a single lantern, hung from a bight and swaying with the wind, which Sinbad was now lighting with a coal from the charcoal brazier.

Farah began disrobing, first taking off her necklace and rings, which flashed in the flickering light from the brazier. She added several bracelets to the pile, then pulled off the clinging wetness of her clothes. With a glance at Sinbad's back she wrapped her nude, damp body in the coarse blanket. She rubbed the blanket against her, clearing her throat significantly.

Sinbad grinned at her and bent to pick up her pile of sodden clothing, which he draped across a line above the glowing coals of the brazier. She sat down on the edge of the bed, gave a shiver, then watched him with trusting eyes. Sinbad poured a goblet of wine from a leather skin, then set it aside. Plucking a dagger from the rack, he stuck its blackened blade into the coals.

"Lie back," he said to Farah and she obeyed, sinking into cushions and mattress gratefully. Sinbad pulled the knife blade from the fire and plunged it into the goblet of wine. The wine steamed and hissed and when it had stopped Sinbad pulled the blade from it and handed the cup to the girl.

"Drink this."

As she took it Sinbad expertly flicked the dagger across the cabin, where it stuck quivering in the wood stanchion next to the sword rack. Then he turned back to look at Farah with searching eyes.

"You were searching for me—why?"

"I was told of your return," she said, taking a sip of the wine. She had raised up on one elbow to drink and the blanket had slipped down to expose her flawless shoulders and the upper slopes of her perfect breasts. "I need help desperately," she said between gulps. "My brother is in great danger . . . !"

Sinbad frowned. "Prince Kassim? I owe him my life." He gestured around him. "And my ship and crew!"

Farah nodded. "A spell has been cast upon him." A shadow of fear and loathing crossed her face. "My uncle Balsora will tell you."

"Why not you?" Sinbad asked. He reached up and tucked the blanket higher around her shoulders to eliminate the distractions of her tempting flesh.

Farah grabbed at his wrist. "Please, I beg you . . . ! Do not leave Charak." Her dark eyes were pleading. "Trust me . . . for my brother's sake."

Sinbad straightened. "For *him* I would risk my life." His impudent grin dissolved his sternness. "For *you* I would *give* it."

Farah seized his hand and kissed it, and Sinbad blinked, somewhat disconcerted. Beautiful women were no novelty to the bearded adventurer, but princesses who kissed his hand certainly were.

He covered his momentary confusion with a hard-voiced question. “I was told there was a plague.”

Farah’s face came up, darkened by anger. “Not true! Balsora rules the city by day, but by night . . .” Her eyes darted toward the ports. “By night, *fear* rules Charak! People whisper of witchcraft.”

Sinbad’s mouth was in a grim line. “How can *I* help?”

She looked at him trustingly. “You will find a way! Oh, Sinbad—I prayed every day for your return.”

The captain looked uncomfortable. “It has been almost a year,” he said, but the princess made a gesture as though that did not matter. “Then . . . then I was not willing to give up the sea . . .”

Farah smiled. “Nor I my life at court . . .”

He matched her smile. “Now I have decided to live on land—”

“And I to live at sea!” she exclaimed with a laugh. They threw themselves into each other’s arms and Farah’s wine goblet fell unheeded to the deck.

“I have returned to Charak to ask Kassim for your hand. Will you consent?”

“Willingly!” she exclaimed. “But only . . .” she pulled back, her manner sobering. “But only when my brother is able to stand before you and give *his* consent. When he is himself again . . .”

Sinbad frowned in puzzlement. “Himself?”

Farah sighed. She tugged the blanket around her and began to speak. “After my father’s death . . . Allah protect his soul . . . the astrologers had decided that the first full moon would be auspicious for the coronation of my brother, Kassim.” She took a deep breath and let it out in a shuddering sigh. “On the day of the ceremony the procession began . . . but . . . even as the crown was placed on his head . . .” She broke off with a sob, unable to continue.

Sinbad patted her back and whispered into her ear “Hush . . . hush . . . Lie back . . . Do not speak of it now.”

Farah eased herself out of Sinbad’s arms and lay back on the wide bunk. In a small voice she continued. “It . . . it was the last time I saw him as the Kassim I’ve known all my life . . . young . . . handsome . . . a true prince.”

Sinbad’s frown was of concern. “Has he fallen victim to the plague? Or an accident . . . ?”

Farah’s voice was weak. “Worse than a thousand plagues . . .”

Sinbad leaned over her. “But what *happened* to him?”

She burst into tears, sobbing in anguish, and Sinbad awkwardly tried to comfort her. He looked around in anger and frustration. “How can I help?” he muttered to himself. “I’m only a sea captain . . .”

Farah’s sobs lessened for a moment and her hand clutched at his wrist. “You’re . . . you’re more than that. You’re a brave man . . . and a man to trust.” The smile she gave him over her hunched shoulder was tremulous and melted Sinbad’s heart.

He sighed and shook his head. “From what we saw . . . and fought . . . tonight . . . well, it takes more than a swordsman’s courage to fight witchcraft.”

“You will find a way,” she said, her sobs lessening. Sinbad held her until she ceased to cry and fell asleep. All the while the bearded captain-adventurer wondered how he could keep her trust in his ability to “find a way.”

CHAPTER 4

The morning sea mist clung closely to the water. Overhead the sky was clear blue, but before him all Sinbad saw from his position next to the helmsman was gray mist. He glanced aloft at Ali, clinging to the highest shrouds. “Well?” he said loudly and the lookout shrugged expressively.

“Fog, Sinbad, nothing but—hold! Wait a moment!” He pointed into the mist, which was thinning. They could hear the waves of the bay breaking on the beach before the city and in moments the high-walled town rose out of the mist in an almost ghostly manner. Sinbad saw a flaming arrow climb high in a blazing arc against the sky.

“Signal arrow,” Ali shouted down. “They’ve seen us.”

Sinbad nodded. The quay was to be seen now and the helmsman steered a true course. The mate shouted orders and the sails fell, to be gathered by the hard-working, well-muscled sailors. But none of them stopped glancing at the mist-shrouded city walls. The story of the ghostly hooded figure and the close escape of Sinbad, Hassan, and the Mate had gone the rounds of the crew.

The ship coasted, moving silently through the oily morning waters toward the stone quay. Princess Farah came out of Sinbad’s cabin, one of his cloaks around her shoulders to ward off the morning chill, but her scanty clothing dry and redonned. She crossed the deck and stood at the rail with a troubled face. The ship drew next to the quay and two sailors, fore and aft, leaped lithely to the surface of the jetty and snugged strong ropes around stone bights, bringing the slow-moving ship to a graceful halt. It bobbed on its own wake, then settled down to the slow rise and fall of the tide.

Sinbad fingered the hilt of his sword, his eyes straying from city gate to the low profiles of the Bedouin tents, dark and spreading to the left and right of the road from quay to gate. The burned, sagging mess that had been Rafi’s tent was still there, smoldering fitfully, its smoke mixing with the thinning mist. Beyond was the tumbled pile of timbers, but Sinbad could see no evidence of any ghouls.

There was a creaking noise at the gate, carrying far over the still waters, and the massive gate of Charak swung open. Sinbad narrowed his eyes as he saw a troop of colorful horsemen ride out, each cavalryman armed with shield, sword, dagger, and lance. Then he

smiled as he recognized the dignified old man at the head of the troop. Sinbad glanced down at Princess Farah and saw her hand raise in a wave to her father's—and now her brother's—trusted Vizier, Balsora.

Sinbad's eyes quickly went along the line of horsemen. Next to Balsora was Zabid, a tough old soldier with a scarred face. A black eye-patch covered an empty socket. Farther along the cavalcade Sinbad saw a litter carried by six large Nubian slaves. On the litter he could see a rather exotic collection of baggage—chests of inlaid wood, brass-bound boxes of cedar, woven baskets with hidden contents, and a strange, cage-shaped object completely covered in scarlet cloth.

Sinbad walked to the head of the ladder to the deck and jumped down, using the ladder's framing to slow his controlled fall. He walked lithely to stand by Princess Farah. She glanced up at him and gave him a shy smile, then her eyes returned to the Vizier.

She saw him give a sign to Captain Zabid, then both their horses broke into a gallop, heading for the quayside. They left the escorting guards with the litter in their midst and galloped noisily down the twisting road between the encampment of tents and clattered out onto the stones of the wide quay.

Zabid quickly jumped down and held the reins of the Regent's horse. He ordered a slave to kneel on the ground for Balsora to use as a step when he dismounted. Sinbad hurried down the gangplank to greet the dignitary.

Sinbad bowed. "Excellency."

Balsora spoke warmly. "Captain! Welcome again to Charak." He started to speak, then caught a glimpse of Princess Farah at the ship's rail. His white-bearded face broke into a wide smile. "I prayed that Princess Farah would reach you safely, Sinbad." His voice shifted to a pious tone. "Allah's name be exalted."

Sinbad looked around, catching only Zabid's one good eye, which looked as fierce as a hawk. "Where is your nephew, Prince Kassim, Excellency?"

Balsora's manner changed. He looked around suspiciously, then took Sinbad's elbow and turned him back toward the gangplank. "Let us go on board."

Puzzled, Sinbad helped the older man up the gangway as the armed guards took up defensive positions all along the quay, with Captain Zabid in a command position at the foot of the gangplank.

Balsora embraced Farah warmly and his solemn face was creased with another wide smile. "O beloved child! Praise to Allah that you are safe." He dropped his voice and almost whispered his next words.

"You have told Captain Sinbad of our misfortune?"

Before she could answer, Sinbad, still doubting, spoke a question. "Is it true, Excellency?"

The Vizier nodded. "Tragically . . . horribly . . ." He twitched with revulsion and fear. "We have consulted all the wisest men and skilled doctors from here to Alexandria . . ." His shoulders drooped in resignation. "They . . . they can do nothing . . ."

The Regent turned away, tears in his eyes. Farah comforted him and Sinbad bridged an awkward moment by calling to the cabin boy who stood nearby with wide eyes. "Boucheri! Food and drink! The best we have . . . for our guests." He turned toward the mast. "Hassan! Maroof!"

Sinbad's men were already moving. As Sinbad led the Regent and Farah to a sheltered part of the deck, Maroof was already unrolling a colorful carpet. Hassan came with an armload of bright cushions, gathered from Sinbad's cabin. In moments there was a comfortable spot in the shade and Farah helped her uncle settle down against the cushions. Maroof quickly rigged a small sail to give added shade against the fierce sun as the cabin boy brought a beaten brass tray of wine and cheese.

Balsora had recovered himself and spoke to Sinbad with a measured tone. "Sinbad, you have traveled to many foreign lands . . . Help us . . ." He gestured at the ocean. "Perhaps there is someone . . . somewhere . . ." His hand went limp, as if in doubt there was really anything to be done.

Sinbad sat cross-legged on the deck before the Regent of Charak. "Truly, my lord, I will do all in my power to help. But what has happened to Kassim requires skills far greater than mine." He shrugged. "It needs an understanding of the Black Arts . . . a great alchemist . . . a magician . . ." Suddenly his expression changed to great delight. "I *have* heard of such a man—if he still lives!"

Farah leaned forward excitedly. "Who? Where can he be found?"

Sinbad gestured toward the distant horizon. "A Greek . . . some say the wisest man in the world . . . His name is . . . ah . . ." He paused, his brow creased in thought. He snapped his fingers at Hassan. *"You* remember . . . !"

Hassan's brow also furrowed in thought. Boucheri returned with a samovar of tea, cups, and a plate of Persian sweets. Maroof helped to serve, as did Hassan, still thinking hard.

"Melanius . . . Melanus . . ."

Sinbad's voice was loud with discovery. "Melanthius—that's it!" He

clapped Hassan on the leg.

Hassan peered sightlessly out to sea, trying to remember more. "The Hermit of . . . of . . ."

"Casgar!" Maroof exploded. "The Hermit of Casgar!"

"Casgar, yes!" Sinbad said. He looked at Vizier Balsora eagerly. "A remote haunted island off the coast of Phrygia," he explained.

Balsora spoke quickly, leaning forward toward the ship's captain. "Have you been there?"

Farah added, "Have you met him?"

Sinbad shook his head. "No . . . nor have I met anyone who has." He looked for confirmation from Hassan and Maroof. "His deeds are legendary," he said to the two noble Charakians, "but . . . like many legends . . . he may not even exist."

Hassan grunted ominously. "The island is ringed with dangerous reefs and whirlpools—always shrouded in mist . . ." He made a gesture that indicated his concern that the island could even be approached safely.

Farah touched Sinbad's arm and got his attention. "You *must* take us to him."

Sinbad exchanged a look with Hassan. "It could be a dangerous voyage," he said to the beautiful princess.

"I will risk it," Farah said, straightening her soft shoulders.

Balsora put out a hand. "No, my child, I cannot allow *you* to go." He turned to Sinbad with a serious expression. "Unless Prince Kassim is crowned before the passing of seven moons, he will lose his right forever to be Caliph."

The princess spoke out boldly. "This Melanthius is our only hope!"

Standing over them, Hassan gave a great sign. "Some say he is mad . . ."

Quickly Maroof added, "And that the island savages eat human flesh and worship him as a god."

Balsora raised a hand. "I will send treasure with you," he said earnestly. "Gold and precious stones, jewels by the handful, for you, your crew, and for Melanthius if he can restore my nephew." He looked at the men and saw their doubt. "Jewels set by the master craftsmen of Persia and Byzantium," he added, watching their eyes.

Sinbad spoke slowly. "Should I undertake this voyage it would not be for gold and jewels . . ." He ignored the faint groans from Hassan and Maroof. He looked at Farah. "But for treasure far more precious."

Balsora's face broke into a wide smile. He clapped Sinbad on the

shoulder. “O my son, may Allah preserve you!” He heaved himself erect and went to the rail, where he shouted down to the one-eyed captain. “Zabid!”

Zabid responded at once, turning to come up the gangplank swiftly. But a sudden, violent commotion among the horses caused him to whirl around. The animals were rearing and whinnying in panic. Two of the horse guards were thrown from their mounts. Zabid ran back to the quay, shouting curses and commands. The two fallen horsemen were badly shaken and groped clumsily on the mossy stone quay, entangled by their lances and swords.

Captain Zabid ran toward the shore, where the main troop was stationed and where horses reared and twisted with loud snorts of fear. Sinbad and the others ran to the railing to watch as another horse reared, falling over backward and throwing its rider into the wet sand of the beach. A riderless horse bolted, neighing, kicking at the bales of cargo along the quay, then veering to tear away along the beach, kicking up puffs of sand. The horse angled up the embankment, to gallop through the Bedouin tents, where it uprooted a tent peg and brought down one of the wide, low shelters. There was dust and confusion, rearing horses, and cursing, angry men. There were shouts and conflicting orders.

Then, striding through the panicking animals, coming out of the dust, was a procession that brought a gasp from Farah, a curse from Hassan, and caused Sinbad’s sword to come whispering from its scabbard. A group of attractive women surrounded a litter in which rode a hooded figure. The face was hidden. The attendant women were all beautiful and graceful, garbed exotically, but each with a completely impassive face.

“Who is that?” Sinbad asked, angry at the superstitious fear that tugged at him.

Farah answered coldly. “Queen Zenobia.”

“Your mother?” Sinbad asked in confusion.

“*Step*mother . . . she was my father’s concubine.”

“But I thought—”

“My mother died when I was born,” Farah said in a chill voice, her eyes on the hooded figure. “It is said that Zenobia is a witch . . . and willed her death.”

Balsora spoke fearfully. “Allah protect us . . . why is she here?”

Zenobia gave an order to one of the eunuchs in her entourage and the emasculated male turned to run up the gangway. He was stopped by several of Sinbad’s sailors and the captain himself became aware

that he had drawn his sword automatically.

The eunuch addressed the sailors with a certain amount of imperiousness that Sinbad had noticed appeared in small people allied to powerful ones. “Her Highness, the Queen Zenobia, commands Captain Sinbad’s presence.”

The eunuch turned back without waiting for an answer and Sinbad, amused and curious now and less afraid, stepped to the head of the gangway. He sheathed his sword as Balsora stepped to his side to whisper a warning.

“Be careful, Sinbad. She is as dangerous as a scorpion.”

Sinbad nodded and walked down the gangway. He let himself stride with an arrogant confidence, the sort of attitude that had given more than one thief or assassin a second thought about tangling with the tall, bearded seafarer.

Sinbad came to Zenobia’s litter and bowed, but kept his eyes upon her. She smiled graciously and Sinbad could see into the darkness of her hood. She was an imperious beauty still, with good bones and commanding eyes. Sinbad saw why the old Caliph had chosen her for a concubine.

“O Queen,” Sinbad said politely, “may Allah’s blessings be upon thee.”

“We meet at last, Captain,” she said in a low, almost husky voice. “What brings you to our shores?”

Sinbad stood straight and looked down at her. “To deliver my cargo . . . and to visit my friend, Kassim.” He looked at her knowingly, smiling with a confidence he did not entirely feel. The intense and demonic power of the woman was strongly felt by this man who had sailed many dark seas and visited strange and exotic ports.

“And his sister?” Zenobia asked.

Sinbad smiled and made a half-bow. “My heart is bound in love to both of them. I intend to ask Caliph Kassim for the hand of the Princess Farah in marriage.”

Zenobia’s voice was like a sheathed knife—steel beneath the smooth exterior. “There is no Caliph to consent to your marriage.” She made a small, negligent gesture with a beringed hand. “Kassim has not yet been crowned. Nor is he likely to be.”

Sinbad’s face grew as hard as her own. “I’ve been told of what has happened. I shall help if I can.”

Zenobia rose up from the soft cushions of her shaded litter, and her voice rose in anger. “Do not be blinded by love, Sinbad. Kassim is *beyond* help!” Her fiery eyes flicked toward the ship, then back to the

tall sailor. "And Balsora must be made to understand once and for all —no one can help! And I shall tell him!"

She swung her feet out of the litter and Sinbad stepped aside as she dropped down to the stones of the quay. He followed as she strode angrily to the gangplank, pursued by a desperate eunuch with an umbrella, who was trying to shade her.

Balsora blanched and tried to hide his superstitious fear as he whispered to Farah. "She is coming aboard! Farah, I beg you not to provoke her." Farah gave her uncle a dark look but said nothing as the hooded Zenobia strode onto the ship.

The queenly figure gave no one a glance, except Balsora, not even when Aboo-seer came down a rope from the mast. Sinbad stepped back onto his ship and watched with Hassan as Zenobia advanced upon Balsora with a determined look.

"Foolish old man!" she sneered. "Why do you interfere?" Her head came up and she smiled a most wicked smile. "You can do nothing for Kassim!"

Farah took a step forward and spoke defiantly. "Captain Sinbad will help us!"

Balsora touched her arm. "I implore you, Farah, be silent," he said in a low growl.

Zenobia turned to Sinbad and pinned him with her fierce eyes. Involuntarily, the sailor's hand went to his sword hilt, but she ignored his gesture contemptuously. "What can *you* do when they have consulted all the wise men, the doctors, the priests, and astrologers . . ." She waved a long-nailed hand to dismiss them all.

Sinbad, spoke quietly, carefully. He saw Bahadin the Helmsman grip his dagger, and shook his head almost imperceptively. "There may be another . . ."

Zenobia snorted, cutting him off. "No one! Abandon this false hope. Kassim is doomed forever."

Farah stepped forward, shaking off Balsora's restraining hand. She blurted out her accusation loudly as Zenobia swung angrily toward her. "You lie! You *want* him doomed! You!"

As Zenobia began to smile Farah looked around, almost in hysteria. Her hand snaked out and plucked Hassan's knife from his belt and she lunged at Zenobia with the blade held high, coming down in a glittering arc toward the hooded figure's breast. But Sinbad was too quick for her. He caught her wrist and restrained her as she struggled to attack Zenobia.

Zenobia laughed, a gleeful, triumphant sneer. "If Kassim is not

crowned within seven moons he will lose his right to be Caliph forever!" Her hand went up and a ringed finger pointed at the sky. "That is the law!"

Farah shouted at her from Sinbad's arms. "And that is why you bewitched him! You want your son, Rafi, to be Caliph!"

Zenobia smiled in contempt, raising her chin and slitting her eyes. "Let me go," Farah said angrily, still struggling. "Let me cut the smile from her face!"

Balsora waved his hands at her, seeking to calm her. "Farah, my child! You will bring an eternal curse on all our heads if you draw one drop of blood of any relation of the Royal Family . . ."

Farah shook her head angrily. "It is only for *that* she has not *murdered* Kassim!" She fought Sinbad's muscles as hard as ever, her anger giving her strength. "She's as cunning as a snake! As malicious as a shark!" Her eyes flashed fire. "But Rafi will *never* be Caliph!"

"There is no one to prevent it!" Zenobia said archly.

Farah snorted and blurted out triumphantly, *"Melanthius* will prevent it!"

There was a stunned silence as Farah inadvertently let slip the name and Zenobia's sudden shift of mood brought them all to even more fearful alertness. Her eyes slitted as they burned anger at Farah. After a moment she spoke, but there was a worried undertone to her voice.

"Melanthius is a myth and his powers are a legend," she said. "He does not exist."

Sinbad spoke up, his first encouragement being Zenobia's sudden and obvious doubt. "We shall soon discover if the myth and the legend exist." He raised his voice to his crew. "We sail tonight!"

Balsora and Farah broke into smiles and the princess stopped struggling. She changed her struggles into an embrace.

"O my beloved! May your days always be blessed!"

Aboo-seer spoke to Hassan under his breath. "And now his nights, too."

Zenobia's voice was as hard as splintered stone. "Sail for Rhodes or Tripoli, Captain," she warned. "You'll find richer cargo there. Don't meddle in this affair. You will find yourself in dangerous waters!" Her feline gaze swept over Sinbad, then she bore into him with the force of her personality, trying to impress him with the force of her will. "Cargoes are richer elsewhere, Captain, and the women generous." She smiled knowingly. "Tripoli . . . a sailor's paradise! Sail for Casgar . . ." She paused, her eyes hot upon him, menace growing in her throaty voice. "Sail in search of Melanthius and you will be setting a course

for Hell and Damnation!"

Sinbad's face was determined. "Danger is an everyday risk for a sailor." Sinbad gave her a thin smile. "Our course is set."

Zenobia gave Sinbad a long and intense stare, her eyes narrowing, increasing the naturally feline quality of her expression. Then abruptly she turned and strode to the gangplank, crossing it in a flurry of black skirts. She rejoined her escort of beautiful women and without a word they left the quay.

The horses of Balsora's escort whinnied and shied at the sight of Queen Zenobia's escort. A horse reared and backed into another horse, which staggered sideways. Both riders cursed and fought to control the animals, who were terrified by the scent of Zenobia's caravan.

The trailing cloaks of the Nubian women stirred up clouds of dust that clogged the nostrils, mixing with the salt of the sea, the frightened sweat of the prancing horses, the faint odor of fish and dung. Sinbad watched the haughty, silent cavalcade of black women, lead by the elegant Zenobia, until they disappeared over the first rise. His eyes were speculative and his fingers still toyed with the hilt of his sword.

Sinbad turned toward his crew. "Aboo-seer! Hassan! Bahadin! Prepare the ship for sea!" He turned to the princess and the Vizier, his voice hard with authority and determination. "Order your men to bring aboard the treasure for Melanthius," he said to Balsora. "We sail for Casgar at the turn of the tide." He raised a warning hand. "One thing I advise . . . set a careful watch on Zenobia. If she *is* a witch she will try somehow to stop us."

Balsora nodded sagely. "My men will watch her castle by day and night." He pointed down at the captain of his guards, who was calming the disturbed horses and reforming the guards. "Zabid there will be in command. He's the best soldier I have."

Sinbad smiled thinly. "Then you'd be wise to order him to cut her throat! *He's* no family relation!"

Sinbad turned away briskly and began snapping orders. Men ran ashore and began gathering up supplies while others began readying the ship for a long voyage.

Farah watched Sinbad with a worried frown, then sighed. "It is in Allah's hands," she whispered to herself.

CHAPTER 5

Zenobia's castle was an edifice that automatically gave shivers to whomever looked upon it. It was built on a narrow peninsula of black rock that reached out into the sea, making approach from the ocean difficult because of the sharp offshore rocks over which the waves crashed. The narrow spit of land also made approach difficult from the land, without being observed. It was an isolated, secret stronghold. Everyone knew where it was, but few had seen the interior. Most of Balsora's subjects avoided the whole area, if possible, and hurried by with averted eyes if they had to pass by on the narrow road.

Within the forbidding walls of her castle, Zenobia was stalking the long corridors. At length, before her was a winding stone staircase. The first few steps were formed from carved black rock, cemented in place. But as she descended, the steps were carved from the native bedrock, a black basalt, webbed with faint lines of gray granite. Each step was worn, the evidence of centuries of footsteps. A few guttering torches were set in rusting iron brackets on the walls. As Zenobia descended the walls became wet and dank, evidence that she had passed below the level of the sea outside. The stairs curved downward, with the black stone arching overhead, further blackened by the soot of unknown centuries of smoking torches.

Zenobia came to the end of the carved steps, then crossed a small space, ducked through a low arch, and came into a cavernous room. She threaded her way between the primitive metal presses and the anvils to the far end of the subterranean workshop. There she found her son Rafi working next to a long, narrow bench. His arm was bandaged, but his other arm rose and fell as he hammered on a piece of metal. Behind him, along the long bench, was a shape, under sheets, that resembled the outline of a giant man. Rafi did not see his mother approach and continued his hammering. He was forming a metal heart of bronze. On the bench sat his model—the real heart of an animal, pulsating inside a glass container filled with a translucent liquid that supported the living heart like a gobbet of raw offal in a protective cocoon of aspic.

Rafi's noisy hammering stopped as he caught a glimpse of his mother watching him. He looked eagerly at her in an unspoken question, the metal-forming hammer in his fist.

"My son . . . Sinbad has agreed to help them." Rafi's face grew dark

with anger. “We must act quickly,” Zenobia said.

Rafi’s anger gave way to cynicism. “What can the captain of a merchant ship do?”

“He is taking them to the Isle of Casgar . . . to consult the great sage, Melanthius.” Rafi’s face stiffened. “Is the heart ready?”

Rafi nodded, “Yes, but . . .” His voice was worried as he peered at his mother. “You said *no* one could help Kassim.”

Zenobia strode to the workbench without speaking and picked up the mechanical heart and studied it.

“Mother . . .”

“Exquisite, my son.” Then, in delayed answer to her son’s question, she said, “If Melanthius truly lives . . . he is the one person who could.”

Rafi’s voice flared in anger, echoing off the walls of stone. “You *promised* me!” He reached out to grab his mother’s arm. “I am to be Caliph! You swore that Kassim would never inherit Charak!” His voice floundered in anger. “If this . . . this Melanthius . . . can restore Kassim . . . !”

Zenobia raised a beringed hand. “I shall prevent it. But we must begin at once.”

“But . . . who is this . . . this Melanthius? Is he that Greek you mentioned years ago when you spoke of the great sorcerers?” He threw his hammer down scornfully, where it clattered among the tools on the bench. “A hermit.” He waved his bandaged arm, wincing, then waved his other hand. “An exile. A dreamer.” His lip curled. “There is nothing he can do.”

His mother’s voice was cautionary, but her eyes peered closely at the mechanical heart. “He is a scholar, Rafi. A man of great reputation. He is not to be ignored or dismissed, if there is the slightest chance he exists at all.” She paused and the metal heart sank to the bench in her hands. “And neither is Sinbad to be lightly dismissed.”

She crossed to the furnace window and looked in and Rafi followed her. “How are we to prevent Sinbad from . . . ? He has a ship . . . a crew . . . Balsora has Palace Guards . . .”

Zenobia’s face was bathed in the crimson glow from the fires of the furnace. “We shall have other forces at our command. That will be *our* army.”

Rafi rubbed at a blister on his hand and muttered, “If the ghouls had done their work properly . . .”

Zenobia’s head came up and her eyes flared at her son. “If you had

done *yours!"* she snapped. Her son winced and extended his hands in a gesture of frustration.

"He nearly killed me!" he protested, balling his fist. His hand went ostentatiously to his wounded arm, but Zenobia was ignoring him.

"A wasted chance," she said with a gesture of dismissal. Her eyes went to the contrivance on the anvil. "Have you finished?"

Rafi was quick to move the subject away from his deficiencies. He picked up the metal form he had been working on and held it next to the living heart in the jar. "Perfect in every detail," he said. "An exact copy of a true heart . . . the heart of a black bull."

Zenobia looked at him with a searching stare. "The bull was slaughtered when the moon was full?"

Her son nodded quickly. "And the heart . . . this heart . . . taken from its body while still beating. Everything was done as you commanded."

Zenobia straightened from her close comparison. Her slanted eyes went to the huge shape under the draped sheeting. "Then all is ready," she said. She gestured toward the figure of the giant and Rafi quickly put down the metal heart and grasped the sheets. With a flair he uncovered the creation of Zenobia's genius.

The figure on the bench was that of a giant man, a huge creature made of bolted sheets of iron and gleaming bronze. The head was still shrouded in a sheet and Rafi hurried to uncover it. As he whisked away the covering Zenobia smiled.

"The Minaton," she whispered.

The head of the great man-thing was that of a monstrous bull, a likeness fashioned from bronze, With fierce bulging eyes, curving horns, and flaring nostrils.

"Fit the heart," Zenobia commanded.

Rafi swept the metallic device into his hands, looked at it closely, set it back onto the anvil to make a few last-minute taps with his smallest forming hammer. He picked it up, pronounced it completed with a satisfied nod of his head, then turned toward the huge figure of the Minaton.

Standing on tiptoe, Rafi placed the heart in the Minaton's great chest cavity. His hands were busy for a few moments as Zenobia watched impatiently. There were a few taps, a scrape or two, more rasps of metal on metal, then Rafi withdrew from the chest of the great metal creature. With a grunt he lifted the massive curving metal plate from the floor, and set it in place across the creature's chest with a clang. In a few moments the chest plate had been bolted into

position and Rafi stepped back, wiping his hands, and surveying the completed metal monster with a sly smile of satisfaction.

Zenobia drew back and began to chant. “Brave and proud Bull, whose mighty heart my son Rafi has fashioned of purest gold—*Beat!* With the power of a hundred mortal men as only I command you—*Beat!”*

Zenobia sprinkled a drop or two from the liquid in a locket around her neck onto the bulging metal chest of the metal monster. She closed her eyes and began muttering an incantation as the liquid turned into a green drifting smoke.

“O Mighty Abu-Salem . . . you who rule over a thousand devils!” Zenobia’s hands stretched out over the bronze chest before her. “By all the powers of Hell and Darkness . . . give strength and life to this your creature.” Her voice rose to a shrill cry. *“Minaton! Minaton!”*

She paused, exhausted with effort, as the echoes of her words died. Zenobia bent over the Minaton, her gaze hard and expectant.

There was a soft, slow boom from the cavernous chest of brazen metal. Then another. And another.

Zenobia’s feline features distorted in a fiendish grimace of triumph as her head came up. Her mane of hair fell back, her eyes gleamed, and her mouth breathed out her hot words—“He lives!”

Rafi’s own eyes glittered as he saw the giant metal fingers flexing and a shudder pass through the huge body. On the stool, near the head, Zenobia saw the bronze eyelids click open. She turned toward her son with an expression of delight, sweeping down from the wooden stool to stand by her offspring and admire their creation. Her fingers stroked the creature’s metal cheek, her eyes shining in triumph.

Zenobia whispered triumphantly. “Perfect . . . perfect . . . a colossus of bronze with the energy of the sun . . . and mine to command!” Her eyes caressed the bronzed giant lovingly. “My Minaton . . . my Minaton . . .”

Nubian slaves carried the treasure up the gangplank and across the deck to the hold. Sinbad and Farah watched Aboo-seer supervising the stowing of the precious cargo, while Hassan admired the exotic chests and boxes, many of them works of art in themselves, and wondered what might be stored inside of their artfully decorated lids. Aboo-seer ordered the chests, several at a time, put into a net and lowered into the hold by means of a small deck crane.

Sinbad called out to Aboo-seer. “As swiftly as you can, old friend!

We must be away before nightfall!" The muscular sailor nodded at his captain, then burst into a curse at the clumsiness of the slaves. "Careful there, you donkeys! That's a Caliph's ransom in your slippery fingers! Take heed or the whip will be blistering your backs!"

Sinbad's attention was caught by an object covered by a scarlet cloth. It seemed to be a large box, carried by slaves who were trying to maneuver it through the opening in the ship's railing. Aboo-seer shouted impatiently at them. "You heard the Captain! Move yourselves—or you'll feel my fist around your ears!"

In fear, the last slave hurried too much and slipped. His unexpected surrender of the weight of the shrouded object was too much for the others. The crimson-covered object started to fall back into the watery space between the ship and the quay. But Aboo-seer got there first and added his muscle to the weight and the box went over the railing jerkily, falling to the deck with a heavy thump.

Farah stifled a scream and cried out. "Carefully! I implore you!"

But the fall was too much. There was the sharp splintering of wood and the accompanying screech of an animal. The scarlet covering slithered off, caught by the foot of a staggering slave. Sinbad was stunned, for under the bright cloth was a cage, now much the worse for wear, and within it a baboon.

Farah reacted with horror and took a faltering step toward the sagging cage and screeching baboon. But Aboo-seer's surprise turned to amusement and a faint contempt. "A pet baboon!"

The baboon chattered and squealed angrily and shook the iron bars of his cage. The sailors around the deck dropped their work to laugh and gather around the cage.

Maroof bent to look at the baboon, grinning widely. "Oh, he's a handsome specimen!"

To Sinbad's surprise Farah broke away from him to run to the cage, and he noticed none of the slaves were laughing like the sailors. He dismissed that, for they were probably in fear of the whip so often employed as a goad and for punishment.

Farah tugged the cloth free from the feet around the cage and quickly recovered the cage. She looked back over her shoulder at Sinbad. "Please . . . make them go away!"

"Does he do tricks, Princess?" Aboo-seer asked in a laughing voice. His face fell when Sinbad snapped out orders.

"Aboo-seer! Maroof! Hassan! All of you! Back to work or I will make baboons of the lot of you!"

The men on the deck walked away, some still laughing, for they had

little fear of their captain's wrath over such a minor matter. But Aboo-seer peered at his captain shrewdly, then looked at the princess, who was still almost at a panic state.

She was kneeling by the scarlet-covered cage and in a gentle voice was speaking softly to the baboon within. "There, there . . . they mean no harm . . . it's all right now . . ."

There were tears in her eyes when she looked at Sinbad and a shiver of odd fear went through the seaman.

CHAPTER 6

Zenobia's castle loomed dark against the starry night. The river of stars that men were beginning to call The Milky Way outlined the spires and walls in dark silhouette. No light, no movement could be seen. Only the night breezes and the crash of waves on the rocks could be heard.

Below the castle, hidden in a cluster of barnacled rocks, Captain Zabid squinted his one good eye at the castle. One of the two soldiers with him stirred fitfully behind him, making a disgruntled sound. "Deathly quiet," he muttered. "Not even a rat stirring."

Zabid nodded agreement. "As bleak and as black as the ruins of Gomorrah."

The second soldier shifted his seat on a wet rock. "What do you suppose they do there? I've heard things . . . strange things, y'know? My sister's cousin used to live nigh, over them hills to the east. She said there was things going on here you wouldn't believe. Women, *beautiful* women, as silent as a post, but doing their work—"

"Hah!" the first soldier snorted. "Nothing wrong with a silent woman, methinks!" He gurgled a little quiet laugh and started into a story about a woman whose tongue had been cut out by an annoyed husband as Zabid moved on.

Zabid went over the rocks silently, then stopped as he saw two soldiers asleep in a cup of rock. He crept silently into the crevice and kicked the feet of a gently snoring soldier. The man awoke with a cry and reached for his dagger, but Zabid had grabbed him by the throat, shaking him angrily.

"Make a noise and I'll slit your throat!"

The soldier blinked, looking about in dazed befuddlement. "What? What?" he sputtered.

"Keep awake," Zabid growled, standing up. He saw that the other soldier had come sheepishly awake and was watching them, fearful of more admonishment, the kind Zabid was known to give lazy and reluctant soldiers.

But the one-eyed captain seemed to concentrate more on the sounds of the surf and the night. "Keep awake," he growled absently.

The first soldier yawned as he gathered up his sword and spear.

“Two nights we’ve watched,” he complained. “My backside has a hundred wounds . . .”

Zabid’s one hawk eye swiveled to him and the soldier cringed involuntarily. “The orders are to keep a watch on Zenobia’s castle—no matter if your backside has a *thousand* wounds!”

The dark-haired captain turned away and walked to the opposite side of the cup of rock. He looked up at the moon, now waning away almost to nothingness.

The sea swells rose and fell with the relentless clock of moontide. Sinbad’s ship rose and fell on the dark blue bosom of the ocean. The colorful sails billowed out, pushing the wooden ship through the waters, cleaving the sea, foaming the waves, sending spray flying back over the deck to sting the cheeks of Sinbad.

The turbaned captain squinted at the sun, swept the horizon with a practiced eye, and his legs compensated for the tilt and sway of the deck. Sinbad felt the salty tang of the air, heard the snap of canvas, the hiss of water along the ship’s side, and the sound of a song from the crew’s quarters.

Out of the corner of his eye Sinbad spotted the leap of a fish. A seabird dipped and banked, then plummeted toward a spot of ocean. With a sudden flurry of wings it was airborne again, but in its claws was the squirming, flopping shape of a fish.

Sinbad took a primitive instrument from a compartment near the helm and took a reading on the sun. Then he watched the crew on the deck for a few moments, savoring the feeling of salt air and a moving deck beneath his feet.

One sailor was brewing tea over a low, wide-legged brazier. Another was sharpening a dagger on a flat stone and testing the point with his thumb. Abdul was mending a much-mended shirt and Sinbad grinned. “Abdul, if you spent less at the gaming tables you might afford a new shirt!”

Abdul looked up with a grin that showed several absent teeth. “Aye, Cap’n, but a shirt only keeps you warm—it doesn’t stir the blood!”

Sinbad laughed, then saw two more sailors throwing dice against the cabin wall and sighed. He didn’t stop it for he was of the mind that all sailors gambled—on everything: returning home, surviving the next storm, eating food stored for weeks or months in smelly holds, coming back aboard from leave in a cutthroat port. And he was the biggest gambler of all, he thought, gambling ship, crew, his life—and the life of Princess Farah—in a mad adventure to find a myth and have him perform a miracle.

Sinbad turned to Bahadin, at the helm. “Three degrees west.”

“Aye-aye, sir.”

Sinbad took another deep breath of the salt air and grinned as Aboo-seer came up the ladder to the poop deck. “The sea is as calm as a shallow pool and the wind fair.”

The sailor nodded. “Perhaps the Princess Farah can be persuaded to come up on deck today.”

“Perhaps.” Sinbad agreed.

“Four days since we set sail,” he said, shaking his head. “And never once out of the cabin. It is unhealthy.”

Sinbad made apologies for her. “The seas have been rough until now. She is a poor sailor.” Aboo-seer spit over the side, then put his gaze on the same horizon as the bearded helmsman. “I shall try to persuade her,” Sinbad said. He heard a scrape and went to the stern rail to look over the side.

Hassan was painting the worn window framing of Sinbad’s cabin, a task they had meant to do in port at Charak. He was held by a rope around his waist. He saw Sinbad’s shadow and grinned up at him, shading his eyes with a paint-flecked hand. Sinbad smiled at him and moved on.

Hassan continued to hum the tuneless little ditty that Sinbad’s appearance had interrupted. His hand slopped on paint with not too expert a hand, but he cared not. He was more interested in remembering the bawdy words to the tune, taught to him by a tawny-skinned wench in a disreputable tavern in Cyrene, on the African coast west of Alexandria. He stopped when he heard a strange grunting sound, followed by Farah’s voice. He frowned as he heard the strange animal grunting again, a kind of guttural chattering. Then again, the voice of the princess.

Intrigued, Hassan edged closer to the cabin windows, pushing out from the stern and letting the roll of the ship move him on the end of his rope toward the windows. He peered in and almost dropped his paint jar and brush in surprise.

Hassan stopped with his feet on the recessed sill of the high transom that ran across the back of the ship. The windows, which were composed of small panes of expensive glass set in frames, were open and the sailor could see and hear easily.

The cabin was cluttered with inlaid boxes and brass-bound chests that housed the more fragile of Balsora’s treasure-payment to Melanthius and some of Farah’s clothing. Along with the princess’s wardrobe chests, the containers so filled the cabin that there was little

room to move. But a space had been cleared, and a small table set between the bunk and the lashed-down treasure pile. On the table was a chess set. On the bunk, with her back to the windows, was Princess Farah, intent upon the chessboard. Across from her was the cage, its broken slats now mended, and within it was the baboon.

And the baboon was playing chess with Farah.

Hassan's brow became deeply furrowed and his curiosity overcame his caution, as it had many times before—not always to his credit. He peered closer to certify that what he had thought he had seen was indeed what he was seeing.

To himself Hassan muttered, "A baboon that can play *chess?"*

But his words were heard by Farah and she leaped to her feet, startled and wide-eyed, peering at the suspended sailor as though he were some sort of savage apparition. She threw herself between the windows and the baboon, but not before the baboon had reached out from between the bars of his cage to wave his hairy hands and utter wild screeching noises at Hassan.

In self-protection—and with a bit of embarrassed nerve at being caught eavesdropping—Hassan waved his paintbrush at the baboon and uttered a screech himself.

Farah motioned him away. "Go away! He is frightened of you!"

Hassan blinked. "I am frightened of *him!* Baboons can turn savage!"

Farah seized the discarded scarlet covering and threw it over the cage. The baboon continued to chatter and mutter but his rage was disappearing. "He is *not* savage!" Farah cried at him.

"With those teeth? Those nails or claws or whatever you call what he has?" Hassan did not want to dispute a princess, but after all, sense was sense. He had seen a tribe of baboons kill one man and scar two others for life.

Farah pointed at him imperiously. "I command you to go away!"

But the chattering of the baboon had died away and Hassan came boldly into the cabin, untying his rope and dropping onto the bunk. "Is he a gift for the wiseman of Casgar? Something for Melanthius to play chess with?"

The cabin door was flung open and Sinbad entered, his face dark with both anger and concern. "Hassan!" He pointed. "Get back to your work!"

Hassan pointed at the scarlet-shrouded cage. "But the beast was playing . . ."

"Chess," Sinbad finished for him. "I know. He has beaten me twice."

“What kind of pet is it that . . . ?”

“He is not a pet.” Sinbad looked at Farah. “He . . . he is not really a baboon.”

“Not a . . . ?” Hassan frowned. It was all too much for him.

Sinbad nodded. “I owe you an explanation. I thought to keep it a secret as long as possible. Some of the crew are superstitious to the point . . .” Sinbad stopped himself. “He has been transformed by the black art of Zenobia’s witchcraft.” He pointed at the cage. “He is Prince Kassim.”

Hassan blinked. There was a stunned silence, broken only by the sound of the sea and Aboo-seer’s distant shouted command to someone in the shrouds. “Can . . . can you be certain that it is not the *princess* who has been bewitched . . . to believe that . . .” He pointed at the cage. “That this ugly animal is . . . the prince?”

Farah burst into tears and cried out, “He *is* my brother!”

The baboon was tugging at the cloth covering his cage and Hassan watched with a stunned disbelief as the long arm came through the bars and grasped a piece of charcoal from a nearby basket. He pulled more of the covering away and Hassan saw his simian face and the ugly, protruding muzzle. With incredible slowness and with much difficulty the baboon scrawled words on the wall of the cabin. As the words began to form and as Hassan realized they *were* words, he gasped.

Wearily, the baboon dropped the charcoal and retreated moodily under the scarlet cloth. Hassan stared at the message written by the baboon: *I am Kassim.*

Sinbad whispered, “Now do you believe?”

Hassan could only nod.

CHAPTER 7

Zenobia's castle was dark and silent under the thin shred of moon that was left. Captain Zabid was on watch, almost as sleepy and bored as his men, but determined to do his duty. One of the soldiers started to tell of a time he was in old Caesarea, in what once had been called Mauretania. "There was this woman—no tender ewe, but an experienced woman, the kind a man can appreciate—and she . . ."

"Sssh. Listen," one of the other men said, holding up a hand. Zabid came fully awake, his one eye searching the darkness.

"What? I hear nothing."

"I . . . I thought . . . no, there it is again."

Their heads came up at a sound. "There," the soldier said.

From somewhere among the black rocks at the base of the rocky cliff directly below Zenobia's fortress came an unearthly sound, a weird, metallic beat like the ticking of a great iron chronometer.

Captain Zabid frowned, tipping his head one way, then another, to better locate the sound. "From the ground . . ? From *under* the ground? Somewhere *within* the cliff?"

"A cave!" one of the soldiers suggested.

Zabid gestured, starting along the rocky beach. "Let's try to find out," he said. "Come on."

Zabid and his two soldiers scrambled over the rocks to the beach and along to a makeshift jetty, where they had seen a small boat tied up when they arrived at sunset. All the time they were trotting along the beach or scrambling over rocks, they continued to hear the peculiar metallic pulsing, even over the sound of the surf.

"Quickly," Zabid ordered, and they climbed into the boat and cast off the lines. The two soldiers took up an oar apiece and Zabid sat in the stern, guiding the small craft with the short steering oar. "Well go out past those rocks," ordered Zabid, "then around to the base of the cliff below the castle."

The men were silent. As they pulled at the oars they gave each other looks. None of this appealed to them. They were simple soldiers, unimaginative and stolid. Give them an honest enemy and the promise of loot—or even pay—and they'd wade in, swords shrieking, their shields being dented by the honest soldiers of the other side. They'd

face charging cavalry—not liking it, but seeing it as a job to be done, a visible enemy that could be vanquished before they returned to the boasting in the tavern and the cheap wine.

But this was getting to be beyond them. Not only the odd, thunderous metallic pulsing, but all the weeks and months past. The changes in the Caliph, the disappearance of the prince, the strange goings-on almost every night. The deaths of their fellow soldiers, Mulai and Mohammed Filali, found hanging on the main gate, their throats cut, had set them all on edge. The appearance of Sinbad had seemed to increase the strangeness of the events. The two soldiers shook their heads as they drew in concert upon the long wooden oars. Strange doings, and now, in the dead of night, there were even stranger sounds.

One of them cast an eye over his shoulder as the metallic ticking increased. “What’s happening, sir?” he asked apprehensively.

Zabid gasped and pointed. The small craft lost way as the two rowers turned. From around a shoulder of rock, the source of the bizarre sound emerged.

The rising thin crescent moon revealed a long, narrow boat made of beaten and bolted sheets of gleaming golden metal. The ship had a long, bladelike bowsprit and was powered by banks of long metal oars that cut through the water with inhuman speed, force, and precision. Zabid’s one eye widened in surprise, then terror, as he got a better look at the shining brass boat. The metal oars were not powered by human muscle, by the traditional ranks of slaves or freemen pulling at the heavy timbers monotonously. A giant metal man stood, his strong arms pumping relentlessly, moving a primitive pump-and-winch mechanism which drove the double banks of linked metal oars.

Zabid’s mouth moved as he stared at the moonlit bulk of the Minaton driving the metallic ship with great speed. “It . . . it . . .” He could not create the words—the two soldiers were also speechless. They saw two human figures, dwarfed by the giant metal man, standing on the stern deck. The soldiers were able to recognize the forms of Zenobia and her sly, much disliked son Rafi.

“A fishing boat—at night!” exclaimed Rafi, pointing.

Zenobia narrowed her eyes at the dark speck on the silvery sea. “No!” she snapped. “Spies of the Caliph! Change course!” She pointed with an imperious hand and Rafi hastened to throw his weight against the steering oar.

The brass boat swung around and Zenobia and her son peered into the darkness ahead. “There!” she cried. “Straight ahead!”

The black-cloaked woman strode to the railing over the main deck.

“Faster!” she shouted to the Minaton. Obediently the metal figure increased the pumping of his magic-propelled arms. The squeal of metal on metal increased dramatically, as did the pumping, pulsating, throbbing metal echo of his heartbeat.

The brass ship clove the dark night waters cleanly, faster than any oar-driven vessel before. The eyes of Zabid and his soldiers were disbelieving as they watched the gleaming ship bear down on them.

“Nothing goes that fast!” Zabid cried.

“It’s coming at—in the name of Ishtar, Captain!—let’s get out of here!”

The men grasped their oars and started to row, but their fear made them clumsy, and they kept throwing frightened looks over their shoulders. Captain Zabid twisted the steering oar, attempting to get them out of the path of the ship now rushing down upon them. But a slight shifting of the glittering ship’s course once again put them directly in the path of the ship’s sharp bow.

“Aiiii!” screamed one of the soldiers as he stood up and dove into the water. The other soldier pumped at the oar, but they only turned in a circle. Zabid rose, reaching for the abandoned oar, but the brass ship was too close. It struck the rowboat in the middle, cutting right through without effort, hurling Zabid into the sea and sweeping the other soldier under the ship to his death.

The deserting soldier was swimming hard, but made the mistake of looking over his shoulder. It was only to see his own death sweeping down upon him with metallic intensity. The sharp bowsprit cut through him almost as cleanly as it had severed the rowboat. His blood stained the night waters for only a few moments, and then it was gone.

By then the brass ship had come to a halt. Zenobia and Rafi leaned over the railing and looked into the wine-dark sea. They saw only Captain Zabid, who Zenobia now recognized by his one staring eye. Bits of the wrecked rowboat were in the water around him. The old soldier was bloody but still fought to survive. His fingers clutched at the smooth bolted plates of the golden craft, scraping across the metal surfaces in vain.

Zenobia saw the Minaton rise from his position and frowned in surprise. He was holding a heavy iron boat hook in his massive metal hand. The silent creature looked over the railing of the metal boat, peering down darkly at the struggling, bloody man in the water. Zabid stared up in frozen fear, seeing the arm of the metal giant rise.

The Minaton, using the boat hook as a harpoon, struck downward in a vicious blow. The hook plunged into Zabid’s chest and he threshed

about, screaming. Even Zenobia was horrified at the next happening.

The Minaton pulled Zabid from the sea, dripping blood and water, impaled on the hook. He swung him over his head as a man might a gaffed salmon, then flung him high into the air. Zabid's dying scream pierced the night as he was flung into the sea on the far side of the ship.

Zenobia turned her face away from the sight, covering her face with her hood, as the Minaton dropped the big hook upon the deck and clumped stiffly back along the deck to his place at the oar mechanism.

The woman in the dark cloak gasped silently for air, then forced command into her voice. "Now," she said, "north by northeast . . . for Casgar."

The Minaton began to pump, his metal arms moving tirelessly. The ship picked up speed, cutting through the water cleanly. Rafi looked at the stars and turned the ship north-northeast. He gulped as the ship clove through the last bits of bobbing wood that marked the grave of three men. Then he raised his head, his familiar smile coming back, sly and knowing.

The brass ship cut through the spray and spume, cleaving the waters strongly, heading toward Casgar.

"Casgar . . ." Hassan said.

Sinbad was looking at the rugged coastline through a telescope, with Aboo-seer, Maroof, and others of his crew watching intently. Sinbad lowered the glass and handed it to Aboo-seer, who studied the shoreline carefully.

"Treacherous," Sinbad said. "The reefs and rocks will be invisible."

Aboo-seer grunted. "It will not be possible to land."

Hassan spoke up in an eager voice. "I have an excellent idea! Let us turn back!"

Sinbad smiled slightly. "Among walnuts only the empty one speaks." He slitted his eyes at the dangerous shore. "There *is* a way." He took back the telescope and continued to study the rocky cliffs and spray-misted reefs.

The sailors looked at one another and shrugged.

"Starboard a fraction!"

Sinbad's order came from below the prow, where he hung, suspended in a leather harness, out over the waves ahead of the ship. There was mist shrouding the water but his voice came through

strongly to Aboo-seer, who stood in the prow, helping Hassan and Maroof hold steadying lines tied to Sinbad. The burly sailor turned and bellowed back down the ship to the helmsman.

"Starboard a fraction!"

The ship moved slowly, with only enough canvas to gather the wind that moved the vessel. Jagged rocks loomed out of the mists, and melted away as the vagrant breezes stirred the grayness.

Hassan glanced over his shoulder as Princess Farah, wrapped in her sari, joined them. He inclined his head in greeting, but said nothing.

Sinbad shouted another direction, which Aboo-seer relayed. Farah moved to Maroof's side, lightly touching the bulging shoulder of the big sailor in order to look over the sharp prow at Sinbad. She whispered quietly to the black sailor, "You are fortunate to serve such a fine captain."

Maroof nodded, his eyes on the lines and his body feeling the slight roll of the ship on the oily waters. "A prince among seamen," he agreed. He shot her a quick look. "He rescued me from slavery and I would follow him to the end of the world." The turbaned seafarer jerked his head toward Hassan and Aboo-seer, then back, to indicate the rest of the hard-bitten crew. "So would we all."

Farah shivered in the chill of the mist, hugged her thin sari to her body, and looked up at the ship's masts, which disappeared into the low-hanging fog. "Even the ship seems to obey him."

Maroof granted agreement. "The poet says that a ship is like a beautiful woman . . . and that a good captain is like a skillful lover." His eyes slide sideways to look at Farah as a smile tugged at the corners of his mouth. Farah smiled back, but drew the edge of her sari across her face to hide the faint traces of a blush.

"Two hairs to port!" Sinbad cried.

"Two hairs to port!" Aboo-seer repeated loudly.

Hassan, his gnarled hands gripping the lines that kept his captain suspended over the spar that protruded from the prow of their ship, muttered to himself. "Truly . . . Fate has us by the shortest of hairs."

The mist seemed to lighten and Sinbad narrowed his eyes, searching right and left, as well as straight ahead. "We are coming into clear water!" he shouted. "Hard to port!"

"Hard to port!"

The morning mist clung on, though it had thinned considerably. The crew stared at the high, sinister cliffs which rose up precipitously from the narrow, rocky beach. The whole island had a ghostly and forbidding look, which narrowed Hassan's eyes and caused Sinbad to

check for his belt dagger.

“Casgar . . .” he whispered.

CHAPTER 8

The mist was still evident, though brighter and thinner, giving the island a more than ordinarily mysterious look. Beyond the narrow beach toward which they were rowing in a small landing vessel, Sinbad could see the high cliffs, their tops shrouded in mist and looking more and more forbidding as they got nearer. The beach seemed deserted, but the sea captain kept a watchful eye in every direction, for he was a cautious man. Things were not always what they seemed, and since the beginning of this adventure, that had been more than normally true.

"A strange . . . haunted place," Farah said in a whisper.

Sinbad nodded. "No sign of life . . . I hope there *is* a wise man of Casgar."

Farah clutched at his arm, her dark eyes glittering. "He *does* exist!" She bit at her lip. "He *must!*"

Sinbad nodded and patted her hand. *"If* Melanthius exists . . . we shall find him."

Farah's eyes dropped to the crimson-shrouded cage tied amidship. "He is the only hope left to us." The cloth stirred and the baboon's hairy arm came out to stroke Farah's hand in a curiously pathetic gesture. Captain Sinbad glanced at the comfortingly wide and muscular back of Hassan, and at the sword and dagger he carried. All his sailors were heavily armed, and behind them, ready to come to their aid, were more of Sinbad's crew.

They rode through the breakers and grounded the boat on the sandy beach. Sinbad and his six men all looked around as they disembarked. The sea captain lifted Farah from the boat and carried her through the surf to deposit her upon the dry beach. Then Sinbad kept a watch on the mist-capped cliffs as his men brought the baboon's cage onto the beach, then unloaded the fancy boxes of treasure.

Hassan and his companions grunted under the weight of the boxes of gold and jewels, and more than once they exchanged glances that said much about what they would rather be doing with the chests.

Princess Farah, too, searched the misty cliffs looming over them with her dark eyes. "No sign of life," she said to Sinbad. She shivered, even wrapped in a cloak.

Sinbad nodded. “No sign of Melanthius,” he said. “But he’ll know we landed.”

“How?” asked Farah.

Sinbad turned to her, missing a vague figure revealed by the parting of the mists, a figure moving among the rocks above. The sailor shrugged. “He has his ways.” He smiled. “After all, he is supposed to be the wisest man in all the Levant.”

Farah sighed again, went over to the cage, and patted the baboon’s paw tenderly.

“All right, men,” Sinbad called out. “Let’s go. Ali, see that the boat is secure.”

Ali and another sailor pulled the boat up onto the beach where it would be safe from the tides, put the oars within, then shouldered their share of the treasure.

With only a few men Sinbad had left everything behind in the large ship but the baboon in his cage, weapons, and the treasure-payment itself. He brought no food, nor any clothing but what they wore. “We can live off the land,” he had told the Mate as they lowered the landing boat.

Now, taking the lead, Sinbad turned the party toward the towering gray cliffs of Casgar and started trudging over the soft sand toward the slate-gray shadow that was the narrow pass. His men took an apprehensive look at the slit in the rock cliff, hefted their burdens, loosened their swords in their scabbards, and started up.

Unseen by them, hidden among the rocks, were the dark-clad figures of men clad in skins. Well concealed and motionless, they passed for shadows. Only their dark eyes moved, following Sinbad’s party as it climbed over the tumble of rock, up through the cleft.

There was a metallic snap, then a loud scraping, and Zenobia’s boat lurched alarmingly. The witch-woman came quickly from her cabin, frowning at the gray mist that obscured everything around them.

She saw Rafi peering over the edge of the rail and joined him. “By the flames of Farlan!” she cursed. Two of the metal oars were broken and another bent badly. A low rock, barely emerging from the dark waters, had several scrapes across it. “It will take hours to repair!” Zenobia said with a low growl. She pointed downward with a long-nailed finger. “Quickly!”

Rafi blinked, then resignedly climbed over the rail and began the disentanglement of the ruined oar.

Zenobia stared ahead into the impenetrable gray wall of mist and



uttered another arcane curse.

CHAPTER 9

Sinbad was in the lead, going up the pass, with Maroof, Farah, Hassan, and Aboo-seer behind him. Farther behind them four sailors struggled with the scarlet-covered cage and the first chests of treasure that were to be their opening gesture to Melanthius.

Sinbad paused for breath, looking ahead as his sailors caught up with him. The path so far, used by generations of sailors, had been well enough defined, if narrow and winding. But ahead, the tumble of fallen rocks made the trail a maze, with each turning a possible ambush. The high walls and the mist above closed them into an endless, winding tunnel, rising and rising, neverending and possibly treacherous. Sinbad knew that often robbers and thieves waited in the approaches to shrines and holy places to rob pilgrims, even to sell them into slavery or hold them for ransom.

Farah caught up to him and also paused for breath. “It’s so quiet,” she said, unconsciously whispering. Even the sound of the surf behind them was muffled and almost unheard. The mist seemed to muffle even the echoes that should have resounded among the narrow passage. They could hear the puff and gasp of the sailors with their burdens, the scrape of a swordtip on a rock, the brittle clink of jewels or coins shifting in their cases. But there were no birds, no chittering of small animals, no wind sighing in the trees.

“How can we be sure where to find Melanthius?” Farah asked.

Sinbad pointed ahead. “This is a path . . . there are tracks, signs . . .”

Sinbad glanced back down the trail, where he saw the treasure-laden sailors pass Hassan, who had sat down upon a rock to tie up some loose boot thongs.

“Come on,” Sinbad said, and moved out ahead of the party.

Hassan looked around as his fingers made the automatic motions of tying the boot straps. He stopped and peered at the top of the cliffs, narrowing his eyes against the sun. Was that a movement he saw?

He stood and shielded his eyes against the bright sun, much brighter here, since they had climbed up out of the perpetual coastline mists. His well-trained eyes searched the rocks and crevices that rippled the edge of the high pass walls, but he saw nothing else. The burly sailor shrugged and moved on quickly to catch up with the others.

But he did not forget he had seen movement, or at least thought he had seen something. A watcher or sentry, perhaps?

Hassan was not the only one whose eyes were searching the cliffs and rocks. Even the sweating sailors carrying the treasure chests shot dark looks at the high rock walls around them.

"I don't like this place," Farah said.

"Nor do I," muttered Maroof. "I've almost drawn my sword a score of times." His eyes left the cliff tops only to measure the path ahead and he didn't like the time spent watching where he put his feet.

"A good trap for archers," Sinbad said in a low voice.

Farah shivered, but Sinbad grinned at her. Wordlessly, he gestured her onward, then took the lead again himself. There were more rocks, more twists of the path, then Sinbad stopped with a sudden gasp.

"A temple!" he said, and Farah hastened to join him. Sinbad pointed ahead. "Carved out of the solid rock!" Farah, too, stared in astonishment. Ahead of them, cut into the side of the rocky mountain of stone, was a Greek temple, columned and graceful, with a wide triangular roof front decorated with carved figures.

Sinbad whispered loudly back to his men. "Hurry!" He waved them up and they temporarily lost their fatigue and came ahead quickly. They crowded up behind Sinbad and the princess of Charak and gaped.

"It's abandoned," Farah said. "At least there's no sign of anyone . . ."

"Look, Sinbad!" Hassan said. He pointed to the left, then right. "More!"

Sinbad ran ahead a few steps and found himself at the head of the winding path through the rocky cleft. The ground leveled out here, but the high walls were still around them, forming a kind of arena. It was apparent the temple they had seen was merely the highest on the cliffs of a great series of huge and beautiful temples, all carved into the gray rock. His dark eyes swept around, peering into the shadows as best he could. He saw nothing. He turned back and waved the rest of his treasure-bearing party in.

"Could be there is treasure in it," Aboo-seer said, looking at the temple with brightened eyes.

Maroof, farther back, shouted to them, "Could be the Castle of Melanthius!" His words echoed against the rocks.

The mists seemed to be thinner here, and sunlight poured into the broad clearing which formed the heart of what appeared to be an abandoned civilization of high order. Sinbad marveled at the size of

the temples, all carved from the living rock, ingeniously using cracks, crevices, bulges, and the very texture of the rock itself.

"They're *huge!"* Hassan said in wonder.

Sinbad nodded. "Aye, as grand as anything the Egyptians cut into the cliffs at Dier el Bahri, where Gueen Hatshepsut lies, or the great statues of Ramses at Abu Simbel, overlooking the Nile."

"You've traveled," marveled Hassan, setting down his burden of the treasure.

"It *is* carved out of the mountain!" Farah exclaimed in wonderment.

Sinbad took a deep breath and his shouts brought back thunderous repeats in the echoes. "Melanthius!"

Hassan drew his sword and started forward. "I will see if anyone is in there." He started trotting toward the building.

The men had felt dwarfed by the sheer vastness of the architecture, and awed by its obviously great age. In fact, the size was so great, yet in such proportion, that they were startled when they saw Hassan mount the steps. Suddenly, knowing his size, the carved mountain seemed even larger. Hassan paused at the edge of the ancient doorway, then, taking a good grip on his scimitar, he disappeared into the shadows.

"Melanthius!" he cried and the echoes were dusty with time. He stepped to the side of the entrance to let his eyes adjust to the dimly lit chamber. He had known many a warrior who had given up his life or parts of his scarred body because they were too impetuous, too confident of their fighting ability, to pay attention to any of the more subtle advantages one must give oneself.

The chamber seemed empty. There was only dust, undisturbed for years, perhaps centuries, stirred only by the wind. Hassan turned and left, squinting against the brightness his enlarged pupils now saw. He rejoined the others and reported. "It is as empty as a tomb."

"Perhaps," Sinbad said, "it *is* a . . ."

There were several shouts and Sinbad's sword slithered from his scabbard as he turned. Some of the shouts were from his men and some, almost animal-like gruntings, were from brutish-looking people at the tops of the cliffs. Rocks were plummeting toward them, striking the hard ground and bouncing or shattering. Dust confused everything as the sailors sought to avoid the hail of stones and boulders.

Sinbad leaped over the pile of treasure and swept Farah into his arms. "Follow me!" he shouted. "Run!"

His men needed no urging. A rock tumbled a sailor, but he rolled to his feet and grabbed the baboon's cage. Another scooped up a treasure

chest just as a boulder as large as his torso crushed the ebony-inlaid box of treasure next to him. There seemed to be more than a dozen of the primitive-looking people hurling rocks from every vantage point overhead and shouting incomprehensible imprecations.

The sailor carrying the cage was struck again. Sinbad set Farah on her feet and she began running as the sea captain grabbed the cage with his sword hand and lifted the bloodied sailor with the other.

It was a moment before Sinbad realized they were not running back toward the pass to the beach. Aboo-seer was in the lead now, and Sinbad silently agreed with his choice of direction, for the pass was an even more dangerous place to be caught. Rocks still hit close and Hassan took a glanced blow to the hip, staggering drunkenly before he recovered his balance.

They outdistanced the larger boulders but were still under fire from fist-sized stones. Ali went down in a tumble, hurt more in the fall among the rocks than by the head blow from a stone. They ran hard, panting, and Sinbad was pleased to see how fleet-footed Farah was, her sari's skirts gathered up and her slippered feet racing over the stony path.

"All right," panted Sinbad. Gasping, the sailors came to a shambling halt. Sinbad looked back. They had run out of the great amphitheater of stone, directly away from the beach, and were higher on the mountain now, out of throwing range of the roughly clad people who had assaulted them.

Panting, they examined their wounds. One of the treasure-bearers had a broken wrist and Hassan used strips of cloth to bind him up, using several sticks of wood he found along the trail. Ali's head wound was more bloody than dangerous, but he adapted his turban into a bandage. Sinbad was unharmed and, except for a few scratches, so was the princess of Charak.

Aboo-seer went back along the trail, then returned to report that the savages they had seen were not in pursuit. "What do we do now, Captain?" he asked Sinbad.

The tall adventurer pointed along the trail. "Let us go that way. If Melanthius was not back there, perhaps he is ahead."

Aboo-seer looked back with a grim expression. "If he was back there, he was a long-gone feast."

Sinbad silenced him with a gesture, his eyes indicating Farah, who was helping one of the sailors sponge some blood off his elbow. Aboo-seer nodded, and started out first.

Sinbad got them all moving and distributed the treasure chests that remained among the uninjured. They climbed toward the nearby crest

of the hill, each wondering whether they might be heading toward a new trap. But at the crest they paused in surprise.

Below lay an extraordinary valley, ringed by a dramatic range of rocky mountains. In the valley, cut from the living rock, was a vast city.

"It is truly incredible!" Sinbad gasped.

They all reacted variously to. the awesome sight of the stately buildings that formed the rock-cut city below. "A magnificent city," Sinbad said. "A *city* of rock-carved buildings!"

"But completely deserted," Farah said softly.

Maroof glowered at the Grecian-style structures, then glanced back along their trail. "Deserted . . . except for those savages." He looked at his captain, who was searching the valley with bright, interested eyes. "It is said they eat *people,"* he muttered to Hassan who was at his side.

Hassan shrugged. He saw Sinbad start down the trail and he followed. Maroof hesitated, taking another long look at their back trail. Then he, too, followed their battered party down into the valley.

As they grew closer they saw that the buildings were carved around cave mouths for the most part. "A cave city," Hassan said, and the others nodded.

"The islanders must live here," Sinbad said. "Or they might be tombs . . ."

They stood at the edge of the city, stopping without command, not eager to enter into the unknown and strange complex of carved caves and strange rocks.

"But there are no children," Farah said, almost in a whisper, ". . . no women . . ."

Aboo-seer pointed. "Look, over there!" They followed his finger and saw an amphitheater. "It's like those of the Greeks that we've seen in Antioch and Epidaurus."

Hassan grunted. "There are *three* like it in Jerash."

Sinbad took a few steps into the city, stepping carefully on the hard stone "streets" between the carved cave mounds. He cupped his hands around his mouth and shouted. "Melanthius! *Melanthius!"* There were only faint echoes. *"Someone!"* he cried. "Come out! We mean no harm!"

There was no answer, no stirrings, no faint cries. "It's a necropolis," Hassan said to himself, but Maroof caught his words and gave him a wide-eyed look.

Sinbad gestured and they stepped out slowly, walking between the

carved façades of the cave mouths. The cliffs rose above them, raw and wild above the smoothly and expertly carved buildings.

Suddenly Sinbad caught a movement and shouted a warning. “Rocks!” The party of adventurers leaped back, away from the nearest cliff, and only just in time. A hail of fist- and head-sized stones struck where they had been walking. Another shower of rocks came down, accompanied by angry but unintelligible shouts from the cliff tops.

Sinbad and the others crowded behind the pillars of a façade as far from the cliff as they could, but still rocks chipped stone all around them. A sailor gave a curse as a rock hit his foot and Aboo-seer grunted as another struck him in the stomach. Sinbad sheltered Farah with his body and tried to think of what to do. He looked around, trying to estimate their chances of bolting from what cover they had and working toward the more open area in the center of the city, away from the cliffs.

He was about to give an order when he saw a woman, a girl, really, come out of one of the carved-front caves. She stood in the street and shouted a sharp command up at the cliffs. At once the savages stopped their barrage of rocks and everything fell silent.

Dressed in a simple, homespun shift and sandals, the girl walked toward Sinbad and his party. She stopped within easy speaking range and regarded them coldly.

“They will not harm you now,” she said. “Have you been shipwrecked?”

Sinbad and the others emerged from the shelter of the pillars and stepped cautiously into the street. Keeping an eye on the cliffs, where most of the primitives stood, Sinbad said, “No.” He looked at the girl and attempted to assess her quickly, for she obviously had great power over the savages above. He forced a smile. “I am Captain Sinbad. My ship is anchored safely.”

The girl-woman let an expression of mild interest cross her face. “Only those who were wrecked have landed here before.” She shrugged and her eyes flicked toward the savages, then back to Sinbad. “But the Casgar people always found them first.”

Sinbad nodded, and stepped closer to the woman, who was blonde, and surprisingly beautiful to be found in such an isolated place. “We seek the wise man known as Melanthius.” He detected a faint flickering in her eyes. “Does he truly exist? Does he live on this island?”

The girl examined him narrowly. “Why do you seek him?”

“It is a matter of great urgency and importance,” Sinbad replied.

The girl looked at Sinbad for a long moment, then her gaze took in each of the others, stopping the longest on Farah. Then she turned and shouted up at the cliff tops in a language none of them understood, a guttural, harsh language. The figures on the cliff tops did not move for a moment and she added another phrase, a steely-voiced order of some sort.

Sinbad saw the savages turn, one by one, and melt away. It made him feel considerably better not to have rock-throwing primitives looming over him. Then the girl turned toward Sinbad, and there was something in her manner, a softening, or a curiosity, that led the sea captain to begin introductions. He started with Farah, for it was she that the blonde girl was eyeing.

"This is Princess Farah, from the distant city of Charak." He gestured toward his crew. "These are my men. Aboo-seer . . . Hassan . . . Ali . . . Maroof . . ." They each bowed as they were introduced, and when he had finished Sinbad turned expectantly toward the girl.

Still without showing any but the faintest traces of emotion, she said, "I am Dione."

She started abruptly away, turning back toward the cave façade from which she had emerged. "Come," she said.

Sinbad stepped quickly after her, followed by his men and Farah, who was looking at the beautiful young blonde with narrowed eyes. "But *Melanthius,"* Sinbad said. "Does he *exist?"*

"Follow me," were the girl's only words.

Sinbad caught up to the blonde girl and gestured at the city around them. "Who built it all?"

"The ancestors of the natives," Dione replied.

Hassan frowned. "What happened to them?"

Dione shrugged. "They became too civilized and destroyed each other."

"Too civilized?" Farah said, and Sinbad shrugged.

Maroof pointed to their right. "Is that where the savages live?"

"Those are the tombs of their forefathers," Dione replied.

"A necropolis . . ." Hassan muttered.

Dione indicated the theater behind them. "That is the theater the Romans built when they conquered Casgar."

"And *those* buildings to the right?" Farah asked.

"The tombs of kings . . ."

Sinbad stopped abruptly. "There is someone there!" he exclaimed, shading his eyes against the sun.

And old man, wearing a long plain robe, was coming forward from the shadows, stepping out onto the terrace before the great carved tomb.

Farah spoke excitedly. “Is that the great Melanthius?”

Everyone had stopped walking, including Dione. Sinbad noticed that she had shut her eyes and wore a slight frown, as if concentrating. The others reacted curiously, shifting their gaze from the distant old man to the blonde girl and back again.

After a moment Dione spoke, as if to herself. “Yes, father . . . I will . . .” Sinbad exchanged looks with Hassan, then the girl opened her eyes and turned to Sinbad. “Melanthius has agreed to see you.”

Sinbad shot a look at the far figure of the man, too far for any but the greatest of poop-deck shouts to reach him. And there had been nothing. Nonplussed, Sinbad asked, “But how did you . . . ?”

Simply, Dione said, “My father taught me. He calls it *tele-patheia.* Greek words for the communication of the mind.” She started walking again, abruptly. “Come. I will take you to him.”

Too stunned to speak, the others exchanged looks, then followed her. They went down the streetlike path, then turned up through some low rocks, to where Melanthius waited for them on the wide stone terrace.

Dione reached him first and turned toward Sinbad and his friends, standing at her father’s side. The old man spoke gruffly, his voice deep with authority and strength. “You are a brave man, Captain Sinbad, and a remarkable navigator to have landed on Casgar safely.” A faint smile touched his bearded face. “It is only for *that* I have agreed to see you.”

Sinbad looked around. “But I still do not understand how . . . ?”

Melanthius waved a hand in dismissal. “The mind is an extraordinary thing, Sinbad. Thought is transferable. It can travel through space . . . even to the stars!” He smiled faintly at Sinbad’s reaction. “But the method needs time and patience . . . and not everyone is adept. Now, how can I help you?”

Again, Sinbad went through a quick introduction, but got no further than introducing Princess Farah, when the old man made an impatient gesture as if he knew all that. “Princess Farah’s brother, the Prince Kassim . . .” he began, but the old man cut him short with a gesture.

Pointing at the covered cage, now dusty and much the worse for wear, Melanthius asked, “What is in that?”

He stepped toward the cage, which the sailor carrying it had put down, and Sinbad stepped forward to remove the scarlet cloth. “It is a

cage holding a . . .”

“Wait!” commanded Melanthius, who then shut his eyes. After a moment he said, “It is an arboreal anthropoid of the genus *Papio.”*

Sinbad pulled away the cloth and the animal within was looking up with piercing eyes. “No,” said Sinbad, “it is a baboon.”

Delighted with himself Melanthius exclaimed, “That is what I *said!* A baboon!”

Sinbad exchanged confused looks with Farah and his men. Melanthius crouched down and peered at the chittering baboon within. Smiling, he reached through to pat the baboon’s head. The animal nipped at his hand and growled.

“Careful!” exclaimed Sinbad. “He can be savage with anyone but the princess.” He looked apologetically at Farah. “That is why he is kept in a stout cage.”

Rubbing his hand, Melanthius stood up. “I see. Yes . . . yes, as a species they are aggressive and of low intelligence.”

Farah came forward and bent down. She reached confidently between the wooden bars and patted the baboon. He responded favorably to her and his growling ceased. “He trusts only me,” she said.

Dione stepped to the cage and bent down. For the first time there was a complete, real emotion on her face: sympathy. “He looks so unhappy,” she said. “Poor creature.” Before anyone could stop her she reached through the bars to caress the animal’s dark fur.

“Be careful!” exclaimed Farah. But she and the others reacted in surprise—and some relief—when the daughter of their host was not bitten or scratched, for the baboon looked at her with unblinking affection and took her caresses without animation. After a moment he took her hand and held it.

Sinbad let out a long sigh and turned to Melanthius. “Master Melanthius, it is the baboon about whom . . .”

The old magician stopped him with another gesture. “You wish to consult me . . . I know.”

Sinbad blinked. He was not yet used to having anyone finish his thoughts for him. The old man gestured toward the tomb entrance.

“I suggest we continue below, in my laboratory, out of the sun.” He gestured as he strode off across the worn flagstones of the terrace. “Come.”

Sinbad ordered the treasure chests and the baboon cage gathered up. Dione waited with them. “Dione,” Sinbad said, pronouncing her name *Die-own-ay,* as she had, “those savages . . .”

“They distrust strangers,” the blonde daughter of the legendary magician said. “They hide from them . . . or attack. It took my father many years to win then confidence.”

Sinbad saw Dione’s gaze on the chests. “Princess Farah’s uncle, the Vizier, has sent much treasure with her, as payment, if your father can help.”

Dione did not change expression. It was as if the matter of a Caliph’s treasure was unimportant and trivial. Her eyes went to her father, awaiting them in the cooler shadows of the great carved and sculpted entrance to the cave dwelling.

Melanthius smiled at his daughter and put his arm across her shoulders as they passed into the dimness of the temple entrance. “Dione is the comfort and companion of my old age,” he said to Sinbad, who could only nod. Melanthius indicated Sinbad’s men with a nod. “They can rest here, Captain.”

Sinbad looked at Hassan and Aboo-seer and they nodded. They dropped the treasure chests with a clatter. Sinbad hefted the weight of the baboon’s cage and followed Farah, Dione, and the old Greek into the deeper darkness.

“Keep a good watch,” he said over his shoulder.

The men slumped down on the treasure chests, using the prince’s ransom as improvised seating. They heard the footsteps of Sinbad and the others fading into the distance within. Hassan stepped out into the sun and gave another searching look around, memorizing the landmarks. If anything were to be changed or move, he would have a mental picture to compare it to and could instantly sound the alarm. But he knew, in his heart, that the important events were going to happen within the bowels of the temple.

CHAPTER 10

They lighted torches and proceeded through the dusty passages to the cooler interior. Sinbad eyed the old man as they walked. He appeared to be harmless, with the wise but somewhat eccentric look of an old scholar, as so often happened with men who spent their lives away from others, alone and self-involved. There was an impish smile beginning on the old man's lips, and men who smiled without Sinbad knowing the reason or sharing the humor made him nervous. He looked at the girl, whom he found infinitely more pleasing. She was beautiful and young, with an innocent air, one of unworldliness, as though she had grown up far from men and their ways. Although ripe of figure and fair of face, she did not flaunt it, either overtly or covertly, as many others would have.

"It is cooler here," Farah said. "More comfortable."

Melanthius gestured at the high-walled passage and the just visible carved murals. "Welcome," he said. "Welcome to my poor hovel."

Sinbad snorted a laugh and gestured around them with his free hand. "Hovel? This valley of splendid temples and great tombs? Why it must be the eighth wonder of the world!"

The old magician smiled faintly. "Welcome to Casgar in any case," he said.

"We came a long way to find you," Farah said, "but we did not expect to discover you in a wonder of wonders!"

The old man shrugged expressively. "But like all wonders, in time abandoned and forgotten." He smiled his impish smile. "Except by me . . . and my daughter." He gestured forward the girl, who had hung back, her wide eyes going from face to face, but spending most of her time looking at Princess Farah.

"It is not much further," Melanthius said.

Melanthius adjusted the bright lamp over the table. On the table, strapped down, was the baboon, with Dione, Farah, and Sinbad on the opposite side from the old man.

The laboratory of the old Greek was a vast cluttered cave, hewn out of the living rock, or perhaps an ancient cave that had been enlarged, the walls and floor smoothed and made more useful. It was crammed

with extraordinary devices, both crude and complicated apparatus for the Greek's experiments. There were tables and benches piled high with retorts, beakers, stoppered vials, geological specimens, and mortars filled with crushed rock. There were mounds of parchment scrolls, some new, some old, some *very* old, and some fallen to the floor. There were skulls, bones, and lead-glass bottles of ground bone. Some of the skulls were whole, others had their tops sawn off, and still others showed signs of crude surgery.

Against the wall were a few amphoras, some sealed with wax and showing the ring-seal impressions of long-dead kings. Others were open, but stoppered. Tucked here and there, under benches and in an untidy stack against one wall, were chests, boxes, lacquered cabinets, a brass-bound coffer with a curious design in silver, and leather cases of various sizes. A sarcophagus of ancient design was under one bench and was partially filled with a collection of glass eyes, dried insects, and polished stones.

There was a basket on one bench, filled with horns of various sorts. Sinbad recognized a rhino's hard dark spear among them. Another chest, open and dusty, contained teeth, great curving predators' fangs. A canister of gold dust stood next to a bag of dried bats. On one table were cages and jars buzzing with Melanthius's entomological collections. Nearby the unborn fetus of some creature lay in silent suspension within a yellowish, murky jar of oily liquid.

The language written upon most of the scrolls was Greek, although there were fragments of ancient clay tablets punched with cuneiform, and a few flat stones carved in symbols of tongues no longer spoken.

Melanthius nodded his head. "Very interesting." He tapped the chest of the baboon. "What we have here is an excellent specimen of a full-grown male baboon of the mandrill variety . . ."

He looked up shrewdly, peering at Farah through his thick eyebrows. "You claim it can write? And play chess?"

"Yes." She paused and wet her lips. "You see . . . he is my brother, Kassim. He was a brilliant chess player from the age of seven."

Quizzically, the old Greek looked from the princess to the passive, nuzzling baboon. "Very interesting . . . yes, very interesting," he said softly. He looked up at her again. "My diagnosis is far from complete." He pointed again at the baboon. "But *this* far, my examination *has* revealed certain curious physiological features which intrigue me." He looked thoughtfully at the animal imprisoned on the table. "He plays chess," he said thoughtfully.

Farah spoke impatiently. "He *wants* to play but he cannot seem to concentrate for very long. This makes him angry." The baboon rattled

his straps and made a chittering, whimpering sound.

Melanthius frowned. "It's capable of primitive emotion then, and anger as well . . ."

Sinbad spoke up. "And pity. I have seen him cry."

Melanthius raised his eyes to Sinbad and searched his face. "Remarkable," he said. "If true . . ."

"You must believe us!" Farah said quickly, reaching across to grip the old man's forearm.

He gently disengaged her hand. "I have spent my long life searching for the Truth." He shrugged. "I am a scholar, a scientist." His impish grin appeared faintly. "Some call me an alchemist, a magician, but I've been trained to believe in factual evidence." His smile faded and he stroked his chin as he studied the baboon. "Before I reach a positive conclusion, I will have to make further tests." His eyes rose to Farah's. *"Then* we can 'interpret' the Truth."

The princess licked her lips, then looked at the baboon. She lowered her head and rubbed her cheek against the ugly snout of the animal. Then she nodded. "What do we do?"

The old man began unfastening the straps. "Tests, my dear, tests. Scientific observation—it's the only way."

The baboon was taken from the table to another cluttered table in the laboratory. Sinbad helped clear away a dry cauldron, covered inside with peeling flecks of green, and a vat of dark, sluggish liquid. He set them next to a cold forge, over which was suspended a pot containing cold lead. Farah gathered up scrolls and a metal box which rattled and dumped them on the floor nearby. Dione wiped down the table and Melanthius rummaged through another chest, this one with bronze bosses of lion's heads, to pull from it a board in which holes had been cut.

The old Greek set the board on the table, dumped next to it several blocks of wood, each of which had been fashioned to fit into the holes. One was round, another square, still another triangular, and so on. Sinbad took a pewter urn from a stool and set it before the table. Farah took the baboon's hand and brought him up on the stool.

Melanthius pointed at the blocks, then at the holes. He reached down and swiftly put each of the pegs into the proper hole. He let the baboon get a good look, then he tipped the board and the pegs fell out. He gestured for the animal to do as he had done.

The long, spidery fingers of the baboon reach out almost shyly, picking up a peg. Sinbad leaned back against a cabinet with a design of inlaid dragons, folded his arms, and watched. The baboon at first

failed to get any of the shapes in the proper holes. He chittered angrily and threw a peg across the laboratory, which broke a test tube, releasing a faint perfume into the air. Melanthius recovered the peg and tossed it back onto the table without changing expression. The baboon snatched it up and, in two tries, found the right hole. In the end, he managed to get two-thirds of the pegs in the proper holes.

Melanthius took away the peg board and Dione set three colored bowls on the table. One was red, one green, and one blue. The old alchemist brought a brass bowl of colored wooden beads, all mixed together, and set it before the baboon. The baboon did not seem to need coaching. He picked up two red beads and dropped them at once into the red bowl. But he confused blue and green, dropping three green beads into the blue bowl.

Melanthius frowned, then returned his face to its former blandness. None of the other humans responded or spoke. The baboon picked up another bead, a blue one, then seemed to realize its mistake. He picked up the blue bowl and dumped the contents into the green bowl.

Princess Farah was delighted, hiding her smile behind her hand. But the old Greek was openly smiling. He gestured for the bowls to be removed and searched through another box, this one with a design of stars and comets inlaid in mother-of-pearl. He produced a small, plain wooden box and set it on the table. He crossed the laboratory, found a banana in a bowl of fruit, and returned to the baboon's test site. He put the banana inside the wooden box, then fastened down the lid with a complicated combination of padlock and key. With his face blank he handed the key to the baboon.

The baboon turned the key one way, then another, then tested it with his teeth. Without warning he threw the key over his shoulder. There was a crash behind them, then the slither of a powder falling from a shattered beaker. The baboon reached out to a nearby table, where a halved geode lay, the marvelous inner world of a rock exposed, snatched up the geological specimen and in one quick blow knocked the lock cleanly from the box. He flipped open the lid and casually plucked the banana from its interior. Without a look at the humans the baboon delicately peeled and ate the fruit.

"Like the Gordian knot," Sinbad muttered to himself. He glanced at Melanthius covertly and saw the scientist's eyes glimmering with mounting excitement. Sinbad leaned close to Princess Farah and whispered in her ear, "I think he's beginning to believe."

Farah gave him a sharp look. "And you?" she asked.

Sinbad shrugged. "It could be several things. I will let the Greek

decide." Sinbad turned away and saw Dione watching him with a curious expression. She quickly averted her eyes, watching her father removing the shattered box and setting out the new test.

It was an old one, and simple. Melanthius put out three walnut shells, old and brittle and polished with use. He found a small round pebble in a pot and capped it with a walnut shell. His hands quickly switched the position of the shells, back and forth, several times. Then he gestured to the baboon.

The black-furred animal looked at him, gibbered, a fingertip on his lips, then reached out and picked up a shell, exposing the pebble. Sinbad grinned to himself ruefully. He had thought it was another.

Deftly the old alchemist covered the pebble with a shell and switched the shell halves back and forth, then took away his hand. There was no hesitation at all this time. The baboon's long, spidery fingers darted forth almost before the alchemist's hand had left the shells. Again he uncovered the pebble.

And again.

And a fourth time, correctly.

As the old Greek started to do the shell game trick for a fifth time the baboon's hands waved him away. He captured the pebble under the shell half and briskly shuffled the shells around. He stopped, looking up at Melanthius with dark, quick eyes. The old man hesitated, looking from the three shells to the baboon. Then his finger touched a shell half and raised it.

Empty.

The baboon raised a shell, exposing the pebble, then covered it and quickly mixed up the shells. Melanthius glanced up at Farah, frowning, then somehow delighted. When the baboon had stopped, the old Greek reached out, touched a shell, then switched his choice.

He was wrong.

He lost a third time. And a fourth. As a baboon started to arrange the pieces for a fifth bout the old Greek scientist laughed. He reached out and took the baboon's paw and shook it heartily.

"Just one more test," Melanthius said. "Dione . . . bring me that mirror." She picked up a polished mirror from a nearby table and handed it to her father.

"As a scientist and alchemist," Melanthius said, "I know that metals can be transformed . . . as a philosopher I can also believe in the possibility of metaphysical change." He lifted the mirror and held it in front of the baboon's face.

At first the baboon snarled and bared its fangs. Then the angry

reaction lessened as it reached out to touch the reflection of itself. The baboon was still, with only its eyes moving in little short movements. Slowly there came over the creature an obvious sadness, a deeply moving regret for what it saw in the mirror. The dark-furred animal turned its head away and after a moment its eyes closed.

Melanthius nodded sagely. Gently he said, “A true baboon would have attacked its reflection, thinking it an enemy or another male transgressing on his territory. It would not have recognized itself and been moved to grief.”

Melanthius set down the mirror and studied the animal a moment. Then he took one of his hands and waited until the animal opened its eyes and looked at him.

With great courtesy the old Greek said, “I am very happy to meet you . . . Your Highness.”

The baboon moved its hands and they were shaking. Sinbad and Dione broke into delighted smiles as Farah wept with relief and unconcealed delight.

CHAPTER 11

"More wine, Captain Sinbad?" Melanthius asked.

"Aye," said the sailor, and held out his goblet.

They were seated in a corner of the huge, cluttered laboratory, reclining on cushions before a low table on which were the remains of their evening meal. Dione was paring an apple for her father and Princess Farah was feeding grapes, one by one, through the bars of the cage to the baboon.

The old Greek sipped his wine and spoke thoughtfully on the subject they had been discussing all through their meal. "Whatever drug or elixir it was that this woman . . ." He paused and looked at Sinbad for a reminder.

"Zenobia," he said.

"Ah, yes. Whatever it was that Zenobia used is beyond my knowledge." He waved the hand with the goblet. "Oh, with time and after exhaustive study and experiments I could probably analyze the ingredients of the drug . . ." He paused and pursed his lips. "But an antidote?" He shook his head. "That would be beyond my powers." He looked sharply at Sinbad as a thought struck him. "I could provide a catalyst that might effect a partial transformation, but I could never guarantee a complete cure." The old man looked sorely at the baboon.

"What did Zenobia use as a catalyst?" Sinbad asked across his wine cup.

Melanthius nodded his head, his eyes moody. "Perhaps the most powerful of all—*black magic!"*

Farah looked up at him in surprise. "But you are the wisest man in the world!" she protested.

Melanthius raised a hand against her words. "Modesty forbids me from agreeing with you, Princess," he smiled. "Even the wisest of men is often helpless when faced with the evil results of witchcraft." He rose stiffly and began pacing.

Farah's lips trembled and her hands strayed to the polished bars of the baboon's cage. "Then . . . then there is no remedy?" She looked in at the animal with tears in her eyes, and it reached out a long hairy paw to touch her.

Melanthius leaned against the edge of the table and crossed his

arms, nodding. “There have been times when men have known how to combat it.” His gaze was far off and his voice low. “Nations and peoples of an intelligence far superior to anything we know today.”

Sinbad leaned forward, his question blunt. “Where are they now?”

The old Greek waved a thin hand in dismissal. “Long dead or destroyed,” he muttered, then waved his hand around to include their surroundings. “Like the civilization that built these temples here in Casgar.” The scholar sighed. “Some were defeated by natural disasters, such as Atlantis, now lost under the sea. Some are covered by desert sand, or shrouded in eternal ice and snow . . .”

The old man’s voice trailed away and Sinbad waited respectfully for him to continue. After several moments the sailor realized Melanthius was lost in thought. He hesitated, then asked another question. “Then all their wisdom is lost to us?”

The white-haired old man roused himself, looked sharply at Sinbad, then answered. “No, not completely . . .” His voice trailed off again, but he caught himself and continued. “No, the nations themselves may have disappeared, their monuments and statues and good work crumbled to dust, but their achievements remain.”

Farah’s eyes went upward. “Like these temples?”

Melanthius nodded. “Exactly.” He stepped away from the table, moving briskly now, as thoughts were beginning to come to him. “But we need more than architecture to heal your brother.” The old Greek paused and reached through the bars of the cage to pat the baboon. “I was thinking of the writings . . . and the legacy . . . of Arimaspi . . .”

Sinbad furrowed his brow, thinking hard, but nothing came. “The Arimaspi?”

Melanthius smiled. “The original inhabitants of Hyperborea . . . the land beyond the North Wind—!”

Sinbad laughed in recognition. “At the World’s End!”

Melanthius smiled, then asked the turbaned sea captain, “You’ve heard of Hyperborea, Captain Sinbad?”

“ ‘Heard,’ yes,” he said with a gesture. “An old sailor’s yarn, a wild story of a lost valley right at the top of the world—surrounded by a vast belt of ice, where nothing could exist . . .” He broke off, self-consciously, as if embarrassed by repeating such lies.

Melanthius spoke firmly. “It does exist.”

Sinbad shook his head with a short laugh. “Never . . .”

“There are many authorities . . .” began the bearded Greek.

Sinbad made a wide gesture of dismissal and rejection and stepped

away from the group. “Poets and dreamers!” he scoffed.

“No,” The old man said strongly. He faced Sinbad and spoke levelly. “Men of science. Herodotus knew and spoke of it.” The old scholar held up a finger, then added another and tapped it with the forefinger of his other hand. “Pythagoras understood some of its mysteries.” A third finger was raised and tapped. “Archimedes of Syracuse, a very dear friend of mine, based many of his inventions on principles originally developed by Arimaspi mathematicians . . .”

Sinbad sneered. “And where did this friend of yours *find* these principles?”

“In a set of ancient scrolls.”

Sinbad looked around. “Where are they?” He turned again. “Are they *here,* these scrolls?”

“Where?” The old Greek looked around, slightly puzzled. “Um, well, the last I saw them they were . . . um, yes . . . over there, under the jar of scorpions.” He stopped and put the end of his finger in his mouth. “Or did I leave them under the ostrich egg . . . ?”

Melanthius started shoving things about and a jar of dried snails fell to the floor and broke. The snails turned to pale dust. The old man shoved a pile of scrolls off the table and they fell, sending up more dust. “Must get things cleaned up,” he muttered. “An orderly mind is a clean mind . . .” He got down on his knees and began rummaging through some crocks and bottles, rattling and crashing about. He picked up one ewer and looked closely at it.

“Hmm, thought I’d used that up.” He set it down, picked up a portfolio made of elephant hide, opened it, shuffled through some sheets, muttered something about always meaning to get it back to Euclid, then tossed it aside. The old man rose, started looking through another table laden with paraphernalia. He picked up another dark bottle, held it against the light, shook it, peered again. “Thought you’d be dead by now,” he said and set the bottle back into the dark. He knocked over a rack of vials which spilled. One broke and something slithered away into the clutter.

“Let me find them, Father,” Dione said, rising.

“Now *where* did I put . . . ?” His voice trailed off as he pulled a scroll from the mess on the table and unrolled it. “Um . . . transmogrification of . . .” He tossed it aside. “No, not that, one.” He pulled out another as Dione started a more systematic search.

He unrolled another scroll and read it for several moments, his lips moving soundlessly, until that scroll, too, was discarded. He picked up the tiny bronze figure of a woman and looked at the papers under it. “I *know* it’s around here somewhere. A bundle about this big, with

three . . .”

“Here,” Dione said, producing a dusty bundle from a straw-filled box. She dusted them off as a sleepy lemur raised its head and was looking over the edge with huge round dark eyes. “Jason was using them as a mattress.” The animal grunted and Dione turned back to him after she had handed her father the bundle. “Oh, now he’s angry because I’ve woken him up.”

Melanthius granted. “He sleeps too much, anyway. He’s getting very fat.” The old Greek untied the twine around the roll of parchments and started spreading them out. “Time we found him a Medea,” he said, but his voice faded as his eyes started searching the scrolls.

Long minutes passed, with only the rasp of stiff old parchment and the sputtering of candles and oil lamps to break the silence. Neither Sinbad nor Farah wanted to break the scholar’s concentration. Jason, the lemur, climbed slowly out of his box, then laboriously got himself up on another chest, and from there to the table. The old Greek scholar patted him as he walked across the parchments, then lifted him to lie across his shoulders while he perused the ancient documents.

“Here, give me a hand,” the old philosopher said, spreading out all three of the scrolls. Eager to help, Sinbad, Farah, and Dione used bowls of fruit, geological specimens, goblets, and other objects to weight down the stiff, heavy paper.

Sinbad peered down at the aged documents for the first time. They were yellow with age, cracked and dusty, and in some places torn. Sinbad saw that they were filled with curious designs, fragments of maps, and everywhere decorated with triangular shapes that suggested the form of the pyramids. The writing on the parchments was a variation of runic cuneiform, a writing that had its origins in clay tablets, where scribes used wedge-shaped sticks to create an alphabet. Sinbad had seen similar writing, in old scrolls from Assyria, Babylon, Akkadia, Persia, and other civilizations long gone or in decline. As most people were right-handed, the script read left to right, so that the scribe could see what he wrote as he did it, a method Sinbad found superior to that of the Hebrews, who wrote in the other direction, their hand hiding what they were writing.

They stood respectfully about for several minutes as the white-haired scholar read eagerly aloud, muttering unintelligibly to himself. Sinbad reached out and unconsciously picked up a wine goblet. The corner of the scroll that it held down suddenly curled and Melanthius started. “Oh!” he said. He wiped at his eyes. “Oh, I quite lost myself there.” He smiled up at Farah and Sinbad, pointing to the scrolls.

"I managed to smuggle these out of Athens when I was banished." He touched the parchment rolls reverently. "They are more than two thousand years old."

Sinbad tilted his head at the Greek magician. "Banished? For what reason?"

Melanthius chuckled. "The charge was blasphemy, but it was really because the Government wanted to be rid of me. It is really remarkable how they can ignore something until it is convenient for them to use it against you. Blasphemy is quite handy that way." The old man shrugged. "I asked too many questions. I made them nervous." He laughed ruefully. "Maybe it wasn't just asking questions, it was the questions I asked." He shrugged. "Well, in any case . . . here I am." He pointed at a scroll. "Now this first scroll, Captain Sinbad, is really of more interest to you than to me." Sinbad peered closer. "Sailing directions." His linger pointed at crude maps and long lines of cuneiform letters. "All the information you need to get us from the Pillars of Hercules to Hyperborea."

Sinbad shook his head. "I can't read it."

Melanthius nodded. "Complicated, I agree. I even had to show Archimedes how to decipher it." He smiled and patted the scroll. "But don't worry, I'll be there to translate it for you." He looked around and looked up at the big turbaned man. "I'm coming with you."

Farah's lips parted in surprise. "To Hyperborea?"

The old Greek nodded again. "Certainly." He smiled. "To journey there has been my life's dream." He tipped his head toward the baboon resting in its cage, holding onto the bars and watching everything. "And it is the only way to restore your brother to his proper shape."

The white-bearded scholar smoothed his hands across the other two scrolls. "These tell of a warm lush valley at the northernmost point of the world . . . sealed in by wide seas of ice and snow." He pointed to marks on the dun parchment. "Here lived the Arimaspi, the civilization that learned to conquer the elements . . ." The old man's voice grew excited. ". . . And who left behind . . . there, in the valley of Hyperborea, a shrine." His fingers traced a path and pointed. "The Shrine of the Four Elements of Earth, Fire, Air, and Water." His eyes glowed with excitement. "And within the Shrine is the source of all then extraordinary power. A power that enabled them to preserve their valley against the ice, and to comprehend the mysteries of transformation." He paused for breath, then looked at the others. "I have been experimenting with a similar power."

Sinbad asked dubiously, "Is there truly such a valley?"

“Beyond a doubt!” Melanthius answered at once.

The excitement grew suddenly in Sinbad. The adventure now seemed to truly have a goal. “Then how soon can you be ready to sail?” he asked the old man.

Melanthius laughed as he moved to the lens of a complex optical structure. “The journey would be impossible,” he said, adjusting an uncut ruby that formed part of the device. “You would be traveling into the coldest regions in the world.” He shook his head and bent an eye to the polished lens.

“But you just said—” began Farah.

“Cold, certainly,” Sinbad agreed quickly. “Difficult and dangerous, perhaps . . . but not impossible. And we will have *you* to translate the scrolls!”

The old, bearded philosopher laughed again. “No . . . no . . .” He waved his hand at Sinbad as he kept his eye to the lens. “I’m too old . . . and there is so little time . . .” He pulled back and looked around the great cluttered room almost helplessly. “So little time,” he repeated.

Sinbad grabbed his shoulder and spoke in eager words. “Come with us, Melanthius!” He gestured toward the baboon, who was watching everything quietly. “It cannot be that this noble prince shall spend the rest of his days in a cage.”

Farah stepped quickly to their side. “The Shrine is his one chance . . . and *you* are the only one who can lead us there.” She clutched at the old man’s robe, her eyes brimming with tears and the desperation showing plainly on her face. “Please! Say you will!”

Melanthius was absorbed in the experiment he was conducting and seemed not to notice. “Dione,” he said, “move the ‘key’ out of the way . . .”

Farah and Sinbad exchanged worried looks. The old Greek took a candlestick and put it in front of the ruby and adjusted a lens behind it. Dione reached in and moved a metal object carefully.

Speaking almost as if to himself, Melanthius said, “That is the key found with the scrolls . . . it opens the only door to the Shrine.” Sinbad looked at the metal object; it was the oddest key he had ever seen.

The old man muttered on, his bearded face pressed close to the lens. “. . . to see Hyperborea . . . to visit the Shrine and examine the very *source* of life . . .” Suddenly he chuckled and his face broke into a wide smile. “Archimedes would split himself with envy!” He was silent a moment and the smile faded. “Now stand back a pace,” he said

quietly.

Melanthius refocused the lenses and at once a powerful red beam of light appeared on the side of a nearby beaker of water, a red shaft which came from his ruby gemstone lens. In a second or two the water began to boil. The old man stepped back, just as the beaker exploded in steaming fragments, showering scalding water over that end of the bench.

Melanthius stared with undisguised delight at the shards of broken glass and the tendrils of steam. “Imagine that force a million times greater!” His eyes swung to Sinbad. “Used not for evil—but for good —*that* is what the Arimaspi have left us!” He turned fully toward them.

The old man examined their faces one by one. “There are stories of ships caught by the ice, crushed like straw baskets! Ice forms on the sails, on people . . . ! The cold eats into you until you cannot move or think! There are stories of ancient beasts, great horned and tusked woolly things, as big as elephants, caught in the ice, frozen—but not dead!”

Sinbad blinked, rousing himself from his almost mesmerized concentration on the imagery the powerful old man had exposed. “But if we are to heal Kassim . . . !”

The old man smiled, his eyes shifting to the curling scrolls. “Ahh . . .” he sighed. “To see Hyperborea . . . it would be the crowning achievement of my long career . . .” His head snapped back and he launched a hearty laugh at the low ceiling. “Hah! The things I can tell Archimedes!”

Farah turned bright-eyed from her rapturous look at Sinbad to speak to the old man of Casgar. “If we succeed,” she said earnestly, “my uncle will strip his entire kingdom to repay you—all the gold in Charak!”

The old man looked astonished. “Gold? But I have no need of gold.” With a short laugh he stepped around the table and led them to another dusty corner of his great meandering laboratory and stopped before a curious and complicated machine. It was metal, large and cumbersome, with inlays of alchemical symbols, with a lever at one side. Near the bottom was a bronze head, that of a satyr or devil, with a wide, screaming mouth. Patting the dormant lemur, which was still riding his shoulder, Melanthius reached out and pulled the brass-bound iron lever to set the machine in motion.

There was a whirring and the whole machine jerked as if struck. Then there were several thumps, a loud hiss, some flashes revealed by inset rubies that acted as tiny windows, then some more whirring, a

series of mechanical clicks. The whole device gave a sudden bonging wrench and a sudden bright stream of gold coins poured out of the machine, clattering noisily into a kettle set below the mouth of the devil's face.

Sinbad and Farah stared in amazement, but Dione hadn't even bothered to come with them. She was back at the table, retying the scrolls and cleaning up the dinner dishes.

"I make my own gold," the wise man of Casgar said, affecting a great casualness. "How would you like it?" He peered at Sinbad, then the princess. His bony fingers twitched at a brazen dial, shifting a pointer to another symbol. "Drachmas? Persian sequins? Just plain old-fashioned Phoenician shekels? Talents? Indian gold rupees? Denarii or florins? Ducats, perhaps?" He pulled down the lever again.

Once again the machine went through its amazing performance of clicks, thumps, hisses, and bongs and spit forth a new stream of coins, these of a different shape and weight, but just as bright and shimmeringly new as before.

"No," the bearded philosopher said proudly. "I don't need any gold . . . any *new* gold."

The mist swirled around Zenobia's ship, dulling the brightness of its metal hull. She turned moodily from the rail, where she had been staring into the grayness, and regarded Rafi's efforts with ill-concealed bad humor. Over a brazier too small to provide really sufficient heat, he was attempting to weld together the bent and shattered oars. Hours of pounding had brought the twisted shafts into something resembling straightness, and now he was making thick, crude welds over the ripped seams and broken joints. He glanced nervously at his mother, who was pacing the deck.

She caught his look and waved him back to work impatiently. "Hurry," she said huskily. *"Hurry."* She turned again to contemplate the dimensionless world of mist as Rafi returned to his hammering.

"Hurry," she said under her breath.

CHAPTER 12

A caravan of camels and donkeys came into the area before the huge temples, moving slowly but steadily, the loads heavy but well balanced. Hassan waved at the sailor leading the pack train and directed it to follow him.

All around was a frenzy of chaotic activity. In one place a number of men were constructing boxes for the old Greek's equipment. Others were packing specimen cages, bundles of scrolls, scales, medical equipment, butterfly nets, ledgers and journals to record everything, as well as sacks of dried figs, salt meat, and other kinds of food that would last for a long time.

Hassan led the sailor through the activity and down the curving path through the cleft to the beach. Sinbad's ship bobbed at anchor and small boats plied continuously between shore and ship. Men were hauling down fresh-cut timber from the forests behind the cliffs and others were cutting and hewing the wood into sledges, following a design laid out by Sinbad.

The burly Hassan helped the sailor unload his bales of skins and furs. Princess Farah sat nearby, under an awning, a heavy chest of gold at her side. Also under the tenting, out of the hot sun, was the baboon in his cage. More camels and donkeys came down the path and Farah hastened to direct them to take their cargoes to the edge of the water.

Here, Melanthius and Dione checked out each box, carton, crate, and container, marking them off against a master list on a long scroll. Then they were loaded into the boats and rowed out to Sinbad's ship.

Sinbad raised his head from a crate and caught the eye of Abooseer. They looked at the confusion along the beach and shook their heads. The big sailor grinned. "Well, Captain Noah, it looks as though your ark were almost ready."

Hassan jumped into an outgoing small boat and rode with the crates of delicate scientific machinery out to the ship. There, the boxes and chests were lifted aboard and each lashed in place on one of the sledges, which in turn was fastened securely to the wooden deck. Some of the more delicate and important equipment was taken below, to be made secure in Melanthius's cabin.

Hassan grabbed a line and swung back into the rowboat. "Back to

shore," he ordered. "We'll be finished today . . . tomorrow we will sail with the tide!"

It was time. Melanthius waded out to the long boat and climbed in, holding the edges of his robe out of the water. He sat down solemnly and watched the approach to Sinbad's ship.

"Hoist anchor!" Sinbad cried, even as they were helping the old man aboard and lashing the boat to the stern. Men rushed to obey and at his next command the mainsail was hoisted. The wind filled the bright canvas with a pop, and the great billowing sail snapped out. The ship began to move smoothly through the water.

Zenobia paced the slanting deck nervously, her ringed fingers curled into twisting claws. Rafi was almost finished. He was over the side, fitting the last of the mended metal oars into position, riveting it to the mechanism propelled by the hulking Minaton.

Suddenly Zenobia stopped and raised her hand, hissing out a warning sound. "Stop!" she said. "Listen . . ."

Rafi raised his sweating face from the oar port and cocked his head. Faintly, out of the fog, he heard a voice. It was an old man's voice, cautioning someone.

Then there was a stronger voice, a voice of command, bellowing out of the gray, fathomless wall of mist. "Raise the main sail!"

Zenobia stepped swiftly to the railing above her son and spoke in a furious whisper. "They are leaving! Hurry! We must follow them!"

Rafi bent again to his work, perched precariously on the lip of the oar port, grunting as he forced the last oar into position.

A single lantern swung in its davits over the cabin table where Sinbad and Melanthius had spread the first of the old scrolls. The bearded captain looked briefly at Farah, sleeping on one bunk under a luxurious fur, and at Dione, resting in the other bunk under a more prosaic, but warm, blanket. The baboon was silent in his cage, moodily picking at his black fur. Lashed and tied all over the cabin were stacks of Melanthius's more delicate equipment, housed in leather-covered chests, brass-bound boxes, inlaid arks, sturdy coffers, and specially constructed cases.

Sinbad spoke, breaking the silence of several minutes in which the two men had been studying the navigational signs and indications on the scrolls. Sinbad pointed a course with his finger, running through

the crude but recognizable outlines of the coasts bordering the western coast of Europe, including the British Isles, which had been conquered by the Romans.

"With a following wind, we should be out of the Middle Sea," Sinbad said, "past the Pillars of Hercules . . . here . . . then into the Western Ocean." He paused, thinking. "We will not get this far until the next full moon."

"We can't do it before then?" asked the white-bearded Greek.

The sea captain shook his head. "Not possible."

Melanthius studied the scrolls again. "Time is all-important for two main reasons. First . . ." He paused to peer at Princess Farah and to ascertain that she was, indeed, still asleep. "First, because though, at the moment, Kassim has the *shape* of a baboon, he is still in possession of certain human qualities . . ." His eyes went to the baboon, who was also apparently asleep, then back to the princess. "But the longer the transformation is delayed, the more he will revert to a baboon's natural pattern of behavior." Again, the old Greek's eyes sought the cage containing the baboon.

"He will become more aggressive," he continued. "More savage and . . . more dangerous." He looked up at Sinbad with troubled eyes. "Delay the transformation and he will *never* be Kassim again!"

Sinbad winced and the alchemist continued in quiet, but terse, words. "Secondly, there is the disadvantage that we have only the few summer weeks to strike through the belt of eternal ice that surrounds the valley." He shook his head sadly. "A month or so . . . not more."

Sinbad's hand jumped to an approximation of their present position. "Let us first get ourselves across the Western Ocean."

Melanthius smiled wanly. "Comparatively simple!" He pointed at the scroll. "The sailing directions are perfectly clear. We continue west by north until we find the prevailing winds and a strong warm current that will carry us north . . ." His fingers traced the course out of the Middle Sea and along the coast near the islands of Britain. "Well past these dangerous coasts and savage islands." Melanthius slapped the outline of the islands. "Nothing here to interest us."

Sinbad stroked his beard. "I've heard tell of a Phoenician trader who sailed there in search of tin. He found nothing but fog and rain."

Melanthius nodded. "Probably uninhabited, though the Romans said there were savages . . . Picts, I think they called themselves . . . who wore skins and painted themselves blue, or some such barbaric behavior." He shook his head in amazement at the varieties of human folly.

Sinbad nodded, his eyes studying the crude maps. “What if we fail to find these winds and that warm current?”

Melanthius smiled his impish grin. “Well, either we fall off the edge of the world or we go right around the earth and find ourselves back where we started!” He shrugged. “It all depends on whether you believe the world is flat, or perhaps round, like a sphere.” He looked wryly at Sinbad. “A question, I suspect, rather of theology than geography! By the time we find out the answer, it will be no help to Kassim.”

Both their gazes went to the baboon in the cage. Sinbad shrugged. “I’m a sailor. I believe in the stars and the winds and the changeability of the seas. I’ve not had time to speculate on mysteries.”

Melanthius smiled. “Then that’s the difference between us, Captain Sinbad—you are a man of action; I am a philosopher. I question everything, *all* the time!”

“Aye.” Sinbad nodded. “I know that out of sight of land . . . and that is a fearsome state, I assure you . . . that when you see the shore once again, it seems to rise from the waters . . . as if the water curved and it was hidden beyond.” He shook his head. “I do not understand that at all. I’ve never seen water curve.”

Melanthius smiled widely. “Of course you have,” he said and picked up a glass goblet and poured water into it from a vessel. “Look closely, Captain Sinbad—it curves, around the edges, where it touches the glass.”

Sinbad peered closely, then nodded. “But the sea . . . if it *does* curve . . . curves the other way, like a woman’s breast.”

The old scholar nodded happily. “Watch,” he said, and poured the glass full—very full. “Watch closely, Captain, before the sway of the ship spills it . . . see that it now curves the other direction. The liquid still clings to the vessel, but it curves . . . very slightly, I grant you, but imagine that glass as wide as the sea!”

Sinbad stroked his beard in thought, then gave it up. He shrugged. “Whatever we believe, it will be the reality that counts.”

Melanthius nodded. He bent again over the scroll, his fingertips tracing the strange runic lettering, his lips moving silently as he sought to translate it.

Sinbad looked at Farah, sleeping. She sighed, and moved her head, as if dreaming.

CHAPTER 13

It was almost dawn. The eastern sky was turning from black to purple-gray. The sea was smooth, the stars still winking in the west. There was no moon and only the sound of the sea and wind.

Sinbad was on watch, the vital dawn watch when men were tired or asleep, when the guard was down, when the predatory fish swam silently, and smaller fish died.

Sinbad was alone at the helm, guided by the familiar stars. He saw the ancient warrior Orion, the Great Bear, the racing Bull, and to the north, Polaris. Once beyond the Pillars of Hercules they would swing the ship's prow that way and sail on into the ice world.

He looked again at the sky. Sagittarius the Archer, the Scales of Libra, the arms of the Crab. To a sailor they were trails, landmarks, friends who pointed the way. Spots of fire, diamonds, holes in the roof vault that bridged the earth, flaming gods, lighthouses, eyes—all the reasons men had compiled to explain the dome of night.

The ship creaked reassuringly, a familiar rhythmic sound like the whisper of the wind and the lap of water against the prow.

What lay beyond the Pillars of Hercules? Sinbad wondered. If they did not turn, where would they end up? Some said Atlantis lay to the west. Others said it lay under lava near the Phoenician islands to the east, beyond Egypt. If they went west would they find the Indies . . . or fall off the edge of the world?

Sinbad grinned at the old belief. Dangers, of course. Stories of great sea monsters and smoking islands that exploded. Savage tribes, painted and screaming, that ate the flesh of men and shrank the heads. There were many stories told in smoky caverns, preposterous tales told by someone who had heard it from someone else. Lands where men with skin like unpolished gold wore great feathered headdresses and tore the living hearts from captives atop giant pyramids of carved stones. They threw virgins draped in golden ornaments into deep pits and worshiped horrible creatures with bulging eyes. Preposterous stories of savages who lived in ruined palaces, of islands where no one lived and great stone idols had been raised, looking eternally toward the setting sun.

Sinbad shrugged. The world was wide and vast and filled with wonders. Golden-haired Norsemen had spoken of forested mountains

ruled by red-skinned savages who were not savages, but lived in tents of hides and worshiped spirits in the sky and wind and earth. There were small black men to the south, toward the legendary Kush and Shem, who fought fiercely and worshiped a tall golden woman with breasts covered in pearls and the teeth of rejected lovers. There were slavers who sold wretched captives and black tribal kings who sold their own subjects. There were the mysterious Egyptians just over the horizon to the south, who had lived there, building great temples since before the memory of man. Sinbad had seen these temples and the giant statues to kings and gods and kings who became like gods. They were old, the dark Egyptians, with wisdom and trickery, despots who married brother and sister to create new rulers for no other was noble enough to have the proper blood. They built empires on slaves, but probed the stars and created great beauty. Sinbad had walked the halls of mighty Karnak, with the columns like the legs of a giant Atlas, he who held up the world, standing on the turtle that swam in the sea that circled the world.

Sinbad sighed again. Would there ever be enough time to see it all, he wondered. The temples of Ishtar, the mother goddess? The vast temple of Zeus? Would there be time to travel to the Oracle at Delphi and speak the question that he secretly held in his heart? Would he see Troy, the city that many said did not exist, but where mighty heroes had fought?

The sea stirred.

A freshening wind came before the dawn, flapping at the bright sails.

And the sea stirred.

Was the story of Gilgamesh true? A man who had lived so long, a great warrior who fought beasts with his bare hands and outlived his grandchildren? Would he see the piles of skulls that warned the travelers from Cathay?

Lamplight reflected off the polished surface of a brass-topped table. Inscribed in the metal was an outline map of the waters beyond the Pillars of Hercules, where most ships feared to go. The waters were etched in wavy lines, and here and there, fearsome dragon heads loomed from the lines, an indication of unknown, but suspected, terrors.

On the shiny surface was the brass replica of a ship and on it rested the fingertips of Zenobia and Rafi. They were concentrating fiercely, their eyes closed, their breathing shallow and ragged. The tiny replica was more of a marker than a model and it drifted one way, then

another, under the guided lingers of mother and son.

Then the ship came to rest.

Zenobia's eyes popped open. Her head tipped down and she stared at the spot on the map. Rafi opened his eyes and his lips parted in eagerness.

"We must be within sight of Sinbad's ship," Zenobia whispered fiercely. Her eyes came up like a hawk's, peering across the dimly lit cabin into those of her son's. "Go and see, Rafi."

He rose and opened a carved door. There was a sudden flare of daylight into the dark cabin and Zenobia winced. She crossed to a low divan, covered with a rich red fabric, and lay down against a mass of cushions covered in damask and silk.

Rafi came out of the passage to the main cabin and his booted feet rang on the metal deck. Droplets of spume from the waves dotted the shiny surface in a million tiny jewels. The long brass oars cut through the sea in an uncannily steady rhythm. Rafi barely glanced at the huge Minaton that effortlessly powered the boat with his threshing arms. Zenobia's son climbed to the poop deck and studied the horizon. He frowned, stared intently at a part of the horizon, then continued to search for several moments.

Biting at his lip, Rafi recrossed the poop deck, went quickly down the ladder, passed the pumping metal Minaton, and returned to his mother's cabin.

Zenobia was lying on the low divan, completely at ease, staring up at the designs on the luxurious cabin's roof, where artisans had hammered intricate decorations into the metal panels. In her fingers, absently fondled, was a tiny crystal locket that hung from a fine gold chain around her throat. Rafi's eyes went to the double locket and he found the words did not come easily.

Zenobia frowned, still not raising her head to look at her son. For a moment there was only the sound of the oars and the passage of water along the sleek metal hull.

"No sign of a sail?" she asked at last, impatient at Rafi's silence.

He cleared his throat. "Um, a moment ago, I thought I saw a ship ahead on the far horizon . . . but I cannot be certain."

Zenobia did not move or speak. Then, in a gesture that made her son jerk in surprise, she snapped the gold chain. Holding the crystal she studied it closely. Within it was a liquid, the color of blood. "We must be certain," she whispered.

Rafi stepped back in fear, raising his hand toward his mother. "But . . . not . . . not . . ."

Zenobia sat up in a smooth, sudden movement. Her slanted eyes darted to her son, pinning him against the polished panels of the cabin's bulkhead. "We must," she said harshly. She looked again at the locket. "I must . . ."

Rafi's voice was choked. "Too dangerous . . ."

Zenobia pinned him again with her penetrating eyes. "And too dangerous *not* to!" Her lips thinned to a harsh line. "The Greek is old, but cunning. I *must* know what he means to do. I must see the scrolls."

Rafi started to protest, but she held up the locket, the broken chain dangling. "This is the surest way," she said, almost to herself. "It was powerful enough to charm Kassim. It will work for me." Again her son started to protest but her hand came up, palm out, and stifled his objections.

"No argument, Rafi! I have decided." Her voice changed and she seemed to be speaking to herself. "Should the Greek's plan succeed, and Sinbad leads Kassim back to Charak in triumph, what becomes of us . . .?" Her feline eyes swung again to Rafi and he squirmed under her stare. "You know the answer. They would burn us both and feed our bodies to the vultures."

Zenobia stood up, her long gown falling smoothly to the metal deck. "I must *see* the scrolls," she insisted. "I must be *first* to the Shrine." She held up the locket and the scarlet contents sloshed within. "This is the last of the secret potion left to me. The old alchemist of Alexandria swore that it was made from elements brought many years ago from the shores of Hyperborea." She stared almost hatefully at the locket. "I have never been able to reproduce it. No amount of gold has ever been able to buy more." She clutched the locket in her fist. "Perhaps in Hyperborea . . ."

Her hand opened and she stared at the locket intensely. "The only way . . ." She took a deep breath and her entire manner changed. The sorceress had made up her mind and now knew what to do. "Now, by Hecate and all the powers of darkness . . ."

Zenobia lifted the locket high, the gold chain trailing, swaying like a tail of some strange animal. "I summon all the force of Hell and Evil!" she commanded. "Help me!"

She flicked open the catch on the top of the locket and lifted the crystal object to her lips, pouring a third of the blood-red liquid into her mouth. Rafi watched, horrified, but also fascinated.

Zenobia's head jerked back as if she were being garroted. Her whole body arched and she fell back upon the divan stiffly, then shuddered. Rafi could hear a heart pounding, but was not certain if it was his own or some strangely amplified sound from his mother.

The slanted-eyed woman groaned, her hands like claws upon the divan, tearing at the rich fabrics. Her body arched and her head went back, an odd, harsh cry coming from her throat. Rafi stared with wide-eyed horror as he watched his mother arched across the couch as if crucified to it.

Zenobia thrashed about, breaking her rigid posture, gasping and making harsh, dry cries. The locket in her hand was raised high, then slipped from her rigid fingers to fall into the disheveled coverings of the couch. She flipped over with a great cry and huddled into herself, then just as suddenly flipped back—and Rafi gasped.

The backs of his mother's hands were feathered. She moaned, then the moan dissolved into a dry, hawking cough. Her fingers were like talons as she clutched at the draperies that hung along the cabin bulkhead behind the divan. With a cry of pain and rage Zenobia ripped the rich embroideries from the wall, sending them flying across the cabin. Rafi put up his hands, but was entangled in the cloth. He tripped and fell to the metal floor with a clang, and became further entangled.

Annoyed and frightened, Rafi fought free of the fabric but the cabin was filling with a cloying green mist. He heard his mother threshing and the beating of what sounded like great wings, the rustling of feathers, and the cawing of some tortured bird. Rafi fought to his feet, but a swaying of the cabin threw him back. The green mist boiled and swirled at his fall and the entire room dimmed and swam to him.

His face running with sweat, Rafi flung the drapery clear and fought his way to his feet, clinging to the metal table desperately. A few feathers wafted downward on stirrings of the green mist and Rafi shrank back against the bulkhead, his mouth dry and his hand held protectively across his face. With wide eyes Rafi looked at the strange object on the divan.

It was hard to distinguish Zenobia within the odd shape on the divan. Rafi blinked, wiping the sweat away, causing another stirring of the billows of green mist. He was afraid, yet oddly excited, as if viewing a dangerous but important event.

The mist cleared, then billowed in again. Rafi's brief glimpse of the bird shape on the divan was that of a smaller creature. He stumbled forward, through the mist and fear, to search with trembling hands blindly in the rich fabric of the couch. His fingers found the locket as the mist swirled away and began dissipating.

A seagull sat on the divan.

It squawked and Rafi's fingers fumbled for the gold chain. Using a section of the broken gold chain he rehung the locket around the neck

of the seagull. Then, very gently, he picked up the bird and carried it out of the cabin.

On deck he lifted his hands and opened them. The bird flapped its long white wings and flew upward into the sky. Rafi shielded his eyes against the sun and followed the flight until he could no longer see the seagull.

Sinbad stood with Melanthius as they examined one of the wooden sledges being constructed in the hold. Hassan looked up as the old Greek grunted. He raised his eyebrows and the two helping sailors stopped work as well.

Melanthius spoke with some irritation. “If you will study my designs,” he said, gesturing toward some parchment sheets, “you will see that there is more curve in the runners. The snow will be deep.”

Hassan looked bewildered. “I have never seen snow, Master.”

Sinbad nodded. “You may wish you never had.” He stepped forward and took the plane from Hassan’s hands. “Here, let me try it.”

The alchemist watched them for a few moments, then grunted and started up onto the deck. Sinbad called after him, “I will be up in a few minutes . . .”

The old man mumbled something and climbed up the ladder to the deck, where he almost immediately slipped as a wave came over the prow and went splashing along the tilted deck.

Melanthius swore in some mumbled language which neither Sinbad nor any of the sailors on deck understood. They watched with the amusement of those who seemed born to tilting decks and rolling floors. Melanthius glared at the smiling sailors and bustled below.

Sinbad tossed the plane to Hassan and stood up. “I think that’s the way.” Hassan eyed the recut angle dubiously, then shrugged.

“What do I know about water that freezes?” he grumbled and set to work.

Sinbad swung lithely up the ladder and stepped expertly across the wet deck. He found the old alchemist trying to negotiate the corridor, which was pitching now that they were beyond the Pillars of Hercules and heading north in the open sea.

The sea captain took the old scholar’s elbow and helped him through the door of the cabin. Princess Farah was sitting cross-legged on the bunk, sewing pieces of animal fur into a great coat. She looked up as Melanthius and Sinbad entered. She hid a small smile from the old Greek as she saw his annoyance at the pitching ship. Her eyes went to Sinbad and they exchanged amused glances.

The sea captain leaned nonchalantly in the doorway, watching as the old man found his seat. "Where is Dione?" he asked Farah.

"Getting more sailor's thread from Maroof. It's the only thing that's strong enough to sew these furs with."

Melanthius lurched into his chair, which had been fastened to the deck, as had been the table. He wrestled his sextant from the voluminous pocket of his clothing and put it on the table. He gave Sinbad a grumpy look, then swept around to glare at both Farah and the baboon. "The sea!" he complained with disgust. Then, ignoring everyone, he began to make his calculations, using scraps of parchment and a feather nib, with preliminary figurings on a wax tablet.

Sinbad could see he was working on his navigational calculations, comparing his figures to those in the cuneiform script on the ancient scrolls. With a grunt, Melanthius smoothed away the figures on the wax tablet, and started again with the stylus. Satisfied, he transferred the figures to parchment, then tested everything against the old scrolls, using a primitive compass.

"Sixty-three by two hundred forty-seven," he muttered. "Twenty-one with eight hundred fifty, um, fifty-four." He frowned. "Wind force, um . . . distance covered . . . seventy-two added to, um, six hundred ninety-four, um, less eighty-nine . . ." The old scholar growled and smashed his fist into the wax tablet, smoothing out the calculations messily. "Not good," he snapped. "Not good enough!"

"Your calculations?" asked Sinbad.

Melanthius looked around at him with a furrowed, angry expression. "You doubt their accuracy?"

Sinbad shrugged. "I don't understand them." He pointed at the brass-bound compass on the table, "Your machine for finding the north—"

"Used by the Chinese for many centuries," Melanthius interrupted. "Absolutely reliable . . . as long as iron does not come close."

"I prefer the North Star," Sinbad replied.

"Where we are going you won't always be able to *see* it!" snapped the bearded alchemist disagreeably. "I'd hoped to be further on by now. But your ship . . ." He indicated the whole vessel with a disparaging gesture.

"My ship can only sail as fast as the wind allows," Sinbad reminded the Greek scholar.

Melanthius frowned down at the scrolls. "From now on, every day, every hour becomes precious . . . we *must* beat the ice." He looked

around at the sea captain in the door. “Is there *nothing* you can do to increase our speed?”

Sinbad raised his eyebrows and shrugged helplessly. “We’re carrying all the sail we can possibly rig.”

CHAPTER 14

The deck of Sinbad's ship was crowded and cluttered with lashed stores and equipment fastened to the sledges. There was a fluttering of wings and a seagull flew onto the deck. It moved about on the worn and polished wood, making little stiff circles, tipping its head one way, then another, its bright eyes searching.

If any of the men on the poop deck noticed the bird they thought nothing of it. On their port side was the open sea, dark blue and crested with whitecaps. To the starboard the ship leaned under the wind that drove them northward. On the horizon was the distant, uneven dark line that was the coast of Europe.

The seagull stopped its pacing and the tiny locket swung on its gold chain, almost hidden under the thick, soft breast feathers. The bird moved close to a coil of rope, and seemed ready to move on, but there was the sound of a cabin door closing. The seagull hopped quickly behind the rope and all but disappeared. Sinbad came along the deck and passed the coil of rope without stopping, going on toward a group of sailors working in the lee of the poop deck.

A wisp of green smoke came from behind the coil of rope. It curled and twisted. More smoke drifted out, caught by the sea breezes, and turned, coiling, twisting, but not being carried away. Sinbad spoke to the sailors, then climbed the ladder to the afterdeck and stood there, his legs automatically shifting his balance with the bob and weave of the ship.

More smoke drifted out in a puff, and through the emerald mist appeared Zenobia . . . but a Zenobia shorter than a man's forearm, a Zenobia only as tall as a short dagger. She peered quickly over her shoulder at Sinbad and the other sailors, fingering the crystal locket on its chain around her throat. She ran quickly across the wooden deck, a surface that now appeared to her to be something like a furrowed field, only hard. She darted to a bucket and hid behind it, until she had ascertained that no one had seen her.

The tiny sorceress started out, then threw herself back as a barefoot sailor came along the deck, carrying a bucket and a mop. She jumped into the shelter of a canvas covering over one of the sledges of equipment, and peeked out. The sailor was humming a ditty, oblivious to her presence. He leaned the mop against the railing and picked up

the bucket, tying a line to it and throwing it over the side.

Zenobia started to ran toward the open door to the passage leading to the cabins. Then she threw herself back into the shadows under the canvas as she saw a sailor coming up the deck toward her.

"Aha, Ali, you have the deck to wash, eh?"

The sailor at the railing pulled up the bucket from the sea, grunting. "Aye, you know Sinbad—he likes a clean ship!"

Zenobia stared with horror as the sailor grasped the sloshing bucket and threw its contents down the deck toward her. The bucket full of water came at her like a tidal wave. She bolted and leaped for the sledge above her, grasping the grainy edges of the raw wood, which still ran with sap, and pulled herself to safety as the flood waters passed below her.

The tide quickly thinned and passed, running this way and that as the ship swayed. She peeked out again and saw Ali mopping the deck in a desultory manner. She swung her feet to the wet deck and waited. When he had worked his way around, so that he was facing away from her and his left shoulder hid his face from her, she ran out from under the sledge and toward the hatchway door.

The door was swinging with the pitching of the ship and Zenobia paused, giving the afterdeck another quick look, then braced herself. As the door started its swing toward being fully open she bolted, grasping the worn sill and vaulting over. She threw herself to the scraped wood of the top step as the door swung back, narrowly missing her and slamming shut with a boom and a metallic click of the latch.

Zenobia got to her feet and dusted herself off. She sat on the edge of the step and jumped down. Each step was as high as her shoulders and while not difficult, it was a strenuous climb down. At last she stood in the small passage before the door to Sinbad's cabin.

The door was closed and she examined it carefully. It was old and carved, with only fragments of its paint left, worn away by the years of seagoing life. The latch was higher than she could possibly reach, or even climb to. But a chance for her lay at the very bottom of the door. Once close-fitting and snug, the door had been warped by the years at sea, making it less than a perfect fit. There was a space just big enough for her to slide through at the bottom.

Lying down, Zenobia slithered under the thick wood and paused, her slanted eyes surveying the room in a quick arc. The old Greek, Melanthius, was hunched over the scrolls on the table, his wax tablet and stylus to hand, muttering to himself. Princess Farah sat cross-legged on the bunk, sewing the thick furs into sturdy, warm coats. She

was partially turned away, to catch the light from the stern windows.

Dione was trying to coax the baboon into drawing on a wax tablet, but the baboon was nervous and short-tempered. The blonde beauty looked up at her father, past the odd set of “keys” that he had prized so much. She was about to ask her father’s advice on getting the baboon to cooperate when there was a clatter. She looked back to see that the hairy animal had thrown down the tablet and seemed to be looking at her challengingly.

Dione sighed. “Very well, Kassim, as you are so bad tempered . . . no more writing today.” Dione closed, the door of the cage and latched it. Sighing, Dione took up some sewing and was soon deeply involved with the heavy stitching the garment required.

Zenobia started to come out from the edge of the door and a noise made her freeze. It was a suspicious sniffing sound, as if someone or something had made an unpleasant discovery. Zenobia eased her way along the crack until she came to the cabin bulkhead, where she rose silently to her feet. From her new position Zenobia could see the baboon cage. Within it, the baboon was stirring restlessly, his head bobbing and turning, his thick nostrils twitching and sniffing.

Zenobia ducked down and moved quickly to hide behind a large sea chest. She edged to the side and watched the baboon with only one slanted fiery eye around the corner of the chest. When the animal was looking the other way the tiny sorceress ran to another hiding place, behind a crate of delicate measuring instruments. She tiptoed along through the narrow slit between the crate and another leather-covered box. She stuck her head out and peered first at the baboon, then up at Melanthius. Satisfied, the tiny woman darted across a narrow space between boxes, but a space into which the baboon could see. She slithered into a very tight spot between a hardwood coffer and a brass-bound chest, went quickly to the other side, and peeked out.

The baboon was still sniffing and looking around, but Zenobia was now almost directly behind the animal. She looked at the space ahead with a critical eye. The table itself now hid her from Melanthius, but there was a chance the baboon might turn. The diminutive figure took a deep breath, then ran toward the table leg.

She grasped it, a huge tree trunk of a shape, and found that the legs of the Casgar wise man hid her from the baboon. With more confidence she then surveyed the area beneath the table. To her, it was almost as vast as a cathedral, with the “roof” very high over her head. The floor beneath the table was covered with stacks of reference books and bundles of scrolls. Zenobia stepped out carefully, looking at each scroll as she passed, hoping to find the ones she wanted.

Climbing over an open volume, Zenobia found the hand-drawn letters were thick beneath her fingers, and the colorful illuminations were like great bedspreads. She sat down and jumped to the floor, and moved toward another bundle of ancient parchment scrolls.

There was a thunderous rumble as Melanthius shifted his feet. Engrossed in his studies he accidentally kicked a bundle of scrolls. Zenobia was knocked backward, falling against the open book. The edges of the paper almost cut her, but she recovered.

More cautiously now, she crept forward, keeping an eye on the old Greek's feet as well. Zenobia stopped and peered into the "tunnel" of a roll of parchment. The lettering, what she could see of it, was some ancient cuneiform. Ducking, she stepped into the papyrus tube and moved along it, trying to piece out the lettering that curved around her. The paper pipe acted like a sound-gathering device and Zenobia could hear the suspicious sniffing of the baboon even louder than before. She also heard the bars of the cage being rattled, but her concentration was on translating the cuneiform and determining if this was, indeed, one of the ancient scrolls from Hyperborea.

Then the bearded old alchemist shifted his feet again, brushing against a pile of scrolls. That bundle struck the one in which the tiny figure of Zenobia hunched. She tumbled, rolling as the bundle tipped and rolled, almost crying out, but stifling her cry at the last moment.

Angrily, Zenobia crept to the end of the paper tunnel when the roll had stopped moving. She looked out and up at Melanthius with a bitter look, then swung her gaze to the baboon with a startled cry, which she managed to dampen.

The baboon was looking right at her, his red eyes glaring. He hissed loudly, baring his fangs, and started shaking his cage angrily. Zenobia ducked back into the tube, turned, and ran bent over to the other end. She looked out, then ran out and behind some books. Breathing hard, she waited. The baboon still hissed and chittered.

"Kassim, please . . ." Dione said.

After a few moments the baboon became quieter, but Zenobia could still hear him sniffing and moving about. She crept out and tiptoed to another roll, where several big sheets of parchment had been tied together. The paper was old, the edges soiled and cracked. She climbed within, only it was darker here, and she could not easily read the symbols written on the surface.

"By the brazen horns of . . . !" Zenobia caught herself. This was not the scroll she wanted. She stepped out and stood with fists on her hips, staring about. She saw an untied scroll right at the legs of the old man's chair. She hesitated, looking at the baboon, then ran quickly to

the scroll. It was rolled too tightly for her to climb in, so she had to press aside the curling sides. It was like shoving great thin sheets of metal, but she managed. She looked eagerly at the symbols on the pages, then swore. Egyptian pictographs!

Angrily, she let the scroll snap closed. Suddenly the baboon was again chittering and hissing noisily.

“Kassim! Be quiet!’ Dione said, looking up from her sewing.

The baboon snarled and shook his cage angrily, jumping up and down, baring his teeth.

Melanthius sighed. “Do as she says, Kassim . . . behave yourself. I’m trying to work . . .” There was a pause, then the old Greek muttered, “Oh, drat . . .”

A scroll came rolling down from the table, a great flopping thing as big to Zenobia as a ship’s sail. It hit the deck with a noisy crash, bouncing and rolling into a huge loose tube. Zenobia froze, listening to the old Greek’s activities. He was muttering again, unintelligibly, and his stylus was punching calculations into his wax tablet. Zenobia started to move very cautiously toward the scroll. Even from where she was she could see it was older than those she had looked at, the paper itself different.

The baboon was still stirring restlessly, circling its cage nervously. Suddenly the baboon stopped, its head jerking to look at the hook securing the cage door. It was loose, almost out of its catch, the result of the shaking and thumping. The baboon became quieter as he reached through the bars to try and push the loosened hook out of its catch.

Dione smiled, her eyes on her needle. “That’s better . . . There’s a good boy . . .”

Below the table Zenobia moved cautiously toward the scroll. It was lying out farther than she had dared venture before, quite within sight of the baboon. But with the quieting of the beast, which she could not see, Zenobia was emboldened to try for it.

A movement made her look up as Melanthius shifted position. A heavy seaman’s knife, lying on the edge of the table from its use in the previous meal, was brushed by the alchemist’s sleeve. It tipped, fell, and Zenobia saw it coming down at her. She leaped back and the knife —as tall as she was—stuck point first in the deck. It quivered from the impact, swaying slightly and sending off a low vibrating noise. It had missed the tiny Zenobia by less than the thickness of a finger.

There was a roar as the baboon slammed back the door of his cage, throwing himself recklessly out into the room. Zenobia, seeing the beast’s snarling face, screamed. The cry was lost in the scramble of

claws on the wooden deck, the shuffle of scrolls as Melanthius turned to see what was happening.

"Kassim!"

Roaring, the baboon scampered around Melanthius, who tried to stop the chittering animal. Trapped by the clutter around his table, the philosopher's hands only fluttering at the animal, distracting it, but not stopping it. Dione. cried and the old man turned to calm her.

"It's all right, it's all right—don't worry, I'll . . ."

The baboon spied Zenobia under the table and jumped for her, but she ran. The baboon swerved, tried to reach her through the legs of the old man's chair, and failed. The Greek reached down and tried to grasp the baboon's scruff but the animal eluded him as it went under the table.

Scattering manuscripts and tipping over piles of old books, the baboon searched for Zenobia with a snarling muzzle and frantic paws. Zenobia, knocked to the deck by a flung scroll, used the paper documents as cover in getting to the stacks of chests and boxes.

Melanthius reached under the table to grasp at the baboon. "Now, now . . ." he began, but the baboon turned and snapped viciously at his hand. The Casgar sage pulled back his extremity quickly and the freed baboon kicked his way through the clutter under the table and out the other side.

Seeing the edge of Zenobia's dress, the baboon reached into the crevice angrily, scratching and clawing.

"Kassim!" screamed Dione in fright. "What are you doing?"

With a mighty swipe of his paw the baboon knocked over a stoppered jar of chemicals, which broke and almost splashed on Zenobia. She fled along the narrow corridor between the chests, her bosom heaving with exertion. The baboon shouldered his way into the stacks of boxes and tumbled down several with loud thumps. One broke open and a large glass beaker smashed loudly.

Sinbad burst into the cabin, sword in hand, ready for anything. Farah, hand to her mouth, pointed wildly to the corner, where the baboon had burrowed in his search for Zenobia. Sinbad sheathed his sword and waded into the falling, swaying, clattering stack of equipment boxes, following the trail of the apparently demented baboon.

The animal shoved forward a chest, blocking Zenobia's wide-eyed escape and almost crushing her. She whirled to try another path but the baboon was too swift for her. His paw snaked out, snapping her up deftly. His teeth were bared in a soundless snarl as he shook her

viciously.

Unseen by anyone and even unfelt by Zenobia her locket chain snapped and it flew into a corner, where it lay hidden. The baboon snarled aloud and started snapping his teeth at the tiny exposed throat of the miniature woman. The baboon's mouth opened and Zenobia saw the long fangs, yellowish at the base and sleek, white spears at the tip. She saw the red-pink interior, dripping with saliva, and in her fear every hair and bump on the ugly baboon's face was in sharp focus.

She screamed.

Sinbad's strong, callused hands reached into the midst of the screaming melee and seized the baboon. The animal fought, squealing and kicking. His grip loosened on the tiny Zenobia and she fell, screaming, toward the deck. She bounced off a kicking leg of the baboon, which broke her fall. Dazed, Zenobia lurched to her feet and ran off toward the corner, gasping for breath.

Sinbad wrestled the snarling baboon into submission and shoved him back into the cage. He firmly locked the door, then took a deep breath. He looked at the distressed Dione. "I'm sorry," he said. He wanted to say more, wanted to tell her that the animal side of the baboon was taking over the human side, but he kept quiet. She'd learn soon enough, he thought.

Sinbad turned toward the disturbed pile of chests to see Melanthius kneeling and heard his start of surprise.

"I thought I saw something move in here . . . Uh!"

Sinbad strode across the small cabin, kicking aside stray boxes, and looked down to where the old Greek was staring so intently. Sinbad's eyes widened with wonder as he saw the miniaturized Zenobia crouching on one knee, disheveled and breathing hard, staring wide-eyed back at them.

The old man's expression of surprise and astonishment changed to a wide smile. "Well, well, well, and what—by Zeus and all the Gods—do we have here?" He peered closer. "And *who?"*

The old scholar reached down to pick up the tiny figure, but Zenobia tried to run. She lurched to her feet, staggered, tried to get between a metal case and a wooden chest, but the Greek's hand was too quick. He snatched her up, gleefully. She struggled, biting and scratching, but the fingers were huge ridged tubes to her, incredibly thick and impervious to her clawing. Melanthius stared in fascination at the squirming form in his grasp, as if he were examining some particularly rare and interesting type of insect.

Then, reaching behind him with his free hand, he picked up a wide-

necked distilling bottle, and popped the specimen inside. Zenobia glared furiously through the glass walls of the retort. She had lost her composure and haughty bearing completely and found that the thick curving glass of her prison distorted and magnified her view and made her dizzy.

Melanthius was still enraptured by her size. “She looks exactly like a woman, but in miniature! More like a doll than a real living being!”

“Never mind,” Sinbad growled. “For all her puny size, she’s still a witch!”

“Fascinating,” murmured Melanthius, observing the perfect scaled-down proportions.

“How did she get here?” Farah asked, her eyes wide.

“She’s a sorceress,” grumbled Sinbad, glaring back at the tiny figure. “And dangerous. They have ways of doing things . . .” He glanced at the baboon, who was trying to see what was happening. “We should have left her to Kassim,” he said, reaching down to lift up the baboon’s cage so that he could see the tabletop.

“No,” the old man disagreed. “She cannot harm us . . . not now.”

Sinbad gestured at the captured witch in the retort. “What do you want to do with her then?” He gave Farah a look that said if she were not present he would have offered some interesting and deadly alternatives.

Melanthius was still studying the tiny figure. “A most interesting and remarkable physiological curiosity.”

“A *witch,”* Farah said grimly.

Melanthius glanced at the princess. “Then all the more reason that I should be allowed to examine her, interrogate her . . .” He looked back at the tiny figure, now standing sullenly, staring at them. “In the interests of science . . . I insist!”

Sinbad raised his eyebrows to Farah. “Princess?” he asked. “Dione?”

Farah took a deep breath, her eyes troubled. She glanced at the baboon, then sighed. “All right,” she said to Melanthius. “As long as you take every care.”

Melanthius nodded happily, his eyes on the contents of the retort. “Never fear. I shall be on my guard. I’ll try to extract the information from her.” He turned to look at Sinbad, his daughter, and the princess over his shoulder. “Take them on deck, Captain. A confrontation between good and evil may unleash forces that . . . that can be dangerous.”

Zenobia watched them rise and heard Sinbad’s voice echoing inside the smooth hard walls of her transparent prison. “I’ll leave her in your

charge then."

"Where are you going?" Farah asked.

Sinbad looked down at the tiny figure and their eyes locked. "I'm interested now in knowing how this witch came on board. How did she find us?" Almost to himself, the sailor continued. "Perhaps she managed to find a ship after all. But what ship? And where is it now?" He started out. "I'm going to double the lookouts."

Melanthius gestured after Sinbad. "Go with him, Princess, Dione." He glanced back at the glaring figure within the retort. "I will have to ask certain questions of a somewhat . . . er . . . delicate nature." He looked at the princess with concern. "I would prefer to interrogate our prisoner alone."

Farah nodded. "As you wish." She went out the door, pausing only to give her aunt, the tiny Zenobia, a look of fear and loathing.

The old scholar seated himself again at the table, his feet stirring the rolls of scrolls. He pulled the retort closer for study, causing Zenobia to lose her balance and sprawl ungracefully. She arose swiftly to her feet, glaring and angry, with red spots of anger on her cheeks. Silently, she suffered under the old man's critical examination as he studied her from all sides and angles.

Zenobia masked her very real fear with her sullen and angry attitude. She knew what *she* would do under such circumstances, but she did not know the old Greek well enough to anticipate what he might decide. To Zenobia there would have been only one sensible solution—destroy her. But Zenobia had more than once been successful because the opposition had not done the sensible thing.

Melanthius said, "Raise your arms above your head, please." Zenobia refused to move, her gaze sullenly set off at some distant point. The old man tapped on the glass with his fingernail, not meaning to harm her, but the noise within the confines of the retort was deafening. "Raise your arms, please." Knowing that further disobedience would only anger him, and hoping to find some weakness, Zenobia obeyed.

"Thank you," the old man said. "Now lower them . . . very good. Would you open your mouth, please? Wide. Wider. Excellent. Um. Yes. Perhaps you'd be good enough to remove your clothing?"

Zenobia was cautious. "Why?"

Melanthius shrugged. "I must begin with a thorough medical examination."

Zenobia tipped her head up and away. "I would prefer not to."

Melanthius chuckled. "Come now, you are hardly in a position to be

modest." He smiled tautly. "And what is there to be ashamed of? In your proper shape and size, you must be an extremely handsome woman."

Despite herself Zenobia was pleased, having arrived at that time in her life when compliments of any kind were getting rare. "Thank you," she said with a kind of strained politeness.

She swung her gaze toward him and in a manner of sweet imperiousness, said, "Now if you would let me out of this glass prison . . ."

"No," the Greek said, shaking his head. His reasonable tone matched with his previous politeness confused Zenobia. But the old man's next words cleared it up. "I recognize Evil when I meet it. You will stay in there until I know what it is that you are after." He peered more closely at her. "What inspired you to take such risks?" A thought struck him and the bearded Greek leaned down to the floor to pick up the dropped scroll and put it on top of the other two. "These perhaps?"

Zenobia tried to keep her face calm and serene, but the excitement grew. Seen through the thick, curving glass the diagrams and curious cuneiform lettering was magnified, but distorted. Her slanted eyes ran across the lines of writing eagerly and the old Greek caught on at once.

"But how could you know that they even existed?" he wondered. Zenobia smiled grimly, but her eyes never left the blurred, distorted words. "And again," Melanthius mused, "what use could they ever be to you?"

Zenobia straightened and looked at the old man boldly. "Use?" she asked.

Melanthius shrugged. "They are written in a runic script that disappeared many thousands of years ago."

"I can read and understand every language," the tiny sorceress said haughtily.

"Including that of the . . . ?" The old man caught himself. He raised a white eyebrow at her. "I very much doubt you would know *this* language." He frowned as another thought struck him. He raised a scroll so that it was clear of most of the distortion near the bottom of the curving retort. "Here . . ." he said suggesting that she read it. "Translate this . . . if you can!"

Zenobia stared for a moment at the strange text and the weird, almost calligraphic designs. "It is an instruction," she said archly. "A chart showing two possible routes to a Delta figure . . . or perhaps a pyramid."

Melanthius looked disgusted. “A child could deduce that from glancing at the diagram . . . but the lettering? What does that tell you?”

“For the moment,” Zenobia said evenly, “. . . nothing.”

Melanthius saw Zenobia’s eyes swinging back and forth across the words, as if memorizing them. Although the lettering was distorted by the glass the sorceress’s eyes scanned the words swiftly.

“Enough,” the alchemist said briskly, suddenly suspicious that she was not telling him the truth. He whisked the scrolls away and rolled them into a bundle. Then he had a thought and unrolled a part of a scroll he had not shown her before, holding it to the glass. Then just as suddenly he snatched it away as he changed his mind.

“If I can’t read it . . .” Zenobia shrugged.

“Then there is no need to waste your time on it,” the old scholar said. He brought his face to the glass container. “Tell me, when will you decide to return to your proper shape and size?”

Her eyes were cold. “When I am ready . . .”

“Now, mistress,” Melanthius said in a new, sterner voice. “I really must insist. What powers have you used to shrink yourself?”

Zenobia drew herself together and glared at the peering Melanthius. “I will never tell you.”

Sighing, the old man shoved himself to his feet and, bracing himself against the roll of the ship, he moved to where they had stored his insect specimens. He unlatched a box as he picked up a pair of surgical forceps. Reaching in, he extracted a hornet from the case.

Smiling, Melanthius turned back toward Zenobia, who bit her lip as he drew closer. The old man sat and held the insect near the glass before Zenobia’s face. The tiny sorceress fought to control her face and stood impassively.

“The sting of this hornet is fatal to the strongest,” he said with a smile, his other hand coming to rest on the retort’s stopper. “To someone of your size . . .” He left the sentence unfinished, but it accomplished its purpose. Zenobia took a step backward, plainly terrified. Her hand went to her mouth and she stared with a terrible fascination at the insect, huge to her, and possibly fatal.

“I despise brutality,” Melanthius said, and shrugged. “But . . . at this moment, I am prepared to reject compassion.” He moved the hornet closer and Zenobia screamed.

"No!”

Melanthius, with a slow casualness, set the sleepy hornet on the nearby wax tablet. Then his eyes swung toward the miniature woman,

flinty and searching in their penetration. “Then answer my questions! And quickly!” He thrust his face close to the retort and the small witch shrank back against the opposite curved wall. “What are you searching for here on the ship?” He slapped the scrolls. “These?” He picked up the keys in his fist. “These, perhaps?” He narrowed his eyes and asked himself aloud, “How could she know of their existence?”

Absently, Melanthius picked up a scroll and examined it. Zenobia stepped closer, her eyes staring again at the scroll. The old man flicked her a glance and turned so that the scroll could not be seen. But Zenobia only shifted her burning gaze to the back of his head.

There was a flickering in her mind.

. . . A blinking

. . . then a hazy picture that flicked into her mind,

. . . a fragment of the scroll

. . . that Melanthius was looking at.

The old man shook his head and pressed fingers to his temples as if he had been hit by a sudden headache. He rolled up the scroll and turned back to the tiny woman in the retort. He saw the keys and moved them as well.

“Tell me,” he said, “when will you decide to return to your proper shape and size?” She did not answer, and after a moment the bearded sage asked, “And how?” More silence.

The magician from Casgar spoke thoughtfully to himself. “Something of unique power . . . a power that might be used to return Prince Kassim to his human form and make our journey to the Shrine of the Arimaspi unnecessary!”

“The Arimaspi!” Zenobia’s cry echoed in the glass retort.

Melanthius realized that he had made a mistake. Angrily, he peered in at her. “Where is it? And in what form? A liquid, a powder?”

He saw Zenobia touch her throat and her eyes widen.

Zenobia realized the locket was gone. In the fight with the baboon and since, concentrating on survival, she had not missed the locket. *Where was it?* she thought. Perhaps, in the fight with the animal it had been torn off?

“You may search me,” she said seductively. “If you wish . . .”

Melanthius nodded. “I will if necessary. But I believe you would have used whatever it is before now, if it was still in your possession.” The huge face outside Zenobia’s glass prison turned away, looking around. “Where could it have got to?”

The old Greek got up and started to putter around the cabin,

scuffling scrolls about and peering into shadows. “Hm . . . a liquid or a powder . . . and what form of container . . . a ring, a drawstring bag, a locket, disguised as a bead in a necklace perhaps . . . ?” Suddenly he stopped and peered happily into a corner. He moved aside several tumbled chests and reached down. “Ah . . .”

The cap on the locket was open. Much of the thick, blood-red liquid had ooozed out onto the cabin floor and had been soaked up by the dry deck timbers.

“Damaged,” Melanthius said. “Not much left, I’m afraid . . .”

Zenobia shuddered, despite her control. To herself she asked a dreadful question. *“How much?”*

Melanthius returned to the table and set the locket on the indentations of his wax tablet. The locket tipped and more of the liquid seeped out onto the wax.

“Take care!” Zenobia cried, rushing to that side of her glass prison. “The liquid is precious! Unique!”

“Evidently,” the old sage said dryly. He righted the locket to prevent further leakage. He saw her eyes flick toward the curious set of keys and he moved them away.

Zenobia pressed herself against the smooth glass, staring helplessly at the locket—so close, yet so far. A low moan issued from her mouth.

The old man smiled wisely. “Yes . . . I am certain it is the very stuff used to transform Kassim into an animal!” He seemed very pleased with his deduction, then sobered as he peered down at the locket. “Hmmm . . . perhaps there is not enough left to retransform him!” A worried look settled onto his face. “But first I must test it . . . yes . . . on our friend here . . . Vesparis Superbus . . . a hornet!”

He righted the locket to prevent any more leakage while Zenobia stared helplessly from her glass cell.

“No!” she gasped. Her fingers clawed at the glass. “No! It’s mine! I . . . I need it!”

Melanthius ignored her and, using the pair of surgical forceps, he carefully picked up the sleepy hornet. “A fine, plump hornet,” he said, looking at it. “Fat and sleepy, huh?” He carefully set the hornet down upon the wax tablet so that his head was directly over the spilled droplets from the crystal locket.

“Will he be tempted?” The scientist’s eyes danced. The insect moved, sleepily, but it was directly over the tiny pool of spilt liquid. “Ah! There’s a good fellow! Lap it up . . . good . . . that’s it . . . *that’s* the way!”

Zenobia groaned. “No . . . no . . . There’s not enough—!” She stifled

another moan with her fist.

“Be silent!” Melanthius thundered at her. His fierce look returned to the still-lapping insect. The old man blinked in astonishment. Quite perceptively the hornet was starting to grow. He was delighted and cried out, “By all the Gods . . . !”

Zenobia straightened, her slanting eyes flashing. She brought herself to a rigid attention. Her eyes narrowed and glared. She spoke harshly, but quietly, to herself. *“By Hecate and all the powers of Hell—!”* Her eyes flashed.

The hornet was about the size of a large bird, very still, as though something were very wrong. To it, the world was shrinking.

Zenobia’s eyes were staring . . . they changed shape and color . . . becoming the evil yellow tiger’s eyes once again.

The baboon chittered in fear, but Melanthius ignored everything but the astonishing sight of the growing insect, now as big as a small dog.

Zenobia’s eyes flared.

Tiger’s eyes.

“Kill! Kill the Greek!”

The giant insect’s wings started to quiver. The creature shivered all over, then an angry snarl of buzzing came forth, quickly building to a crescendo. Without warning the monster hornet launched itself from the table straight at the startled Greek. Melanthius threw up his arms to protect his eyes from the massive sting of the enormous insect. The hornet smashed into his upraised arm and threw Melanthius backwards.

The old scientist crashed into the stacks of equipment as the hornet circled for another attack. Melanthius lurched away as the insect dove at him, striking the table. The retort fell over and Zenobia was thrown off her tiny feet. Melanthius struggled past, crying out, “Sinbad! Sinbad!”

The hornet circled, its wings whirring, cramped by the size of the cabin. It aimed itself at the old Greek and started across, buzzing loudly and angrily. Melanthius cried out. He snatched up a snail case and threw it overhand at the approaching hornet. The insect dodged, but his attack was thrown off. He began to pursue the man around the cabin.

Zenobia crawled from the toppled retort and jumped toward the locket. Desperately, she began to lick up the remaining liquid on the wax tablet.

Melanthius tripped, fell heavily against the deck as the hornet zoomed by, barely missing him. The old Greek’s feet kicked out and

accidentally knocked over the cage of the screaming baboon. The animal tried to reach out for the whirring hornet but could not come close. The hornet dived again and Melanthius rolled over on the deck, smashing the baboon's cage into piles of scientific equipment. The cabin was a shambles. The hornet's buzzing was like the sound of a million angry swarming wasps. The gibbering and screams of the baboon, the old man's cries of pain as he struck sharp corners, the breaking and shattering of glassware also filled the cabin with mayhem.

Melanthius lurched to his feet, saw a wisp of green smoke on the tabletop . . . and a seagull. The bird picked up the crystal locket in its beak and hopped across the table. He cried out but the bird launched itself and flew to the open stern window.

Sinbad burst in, sword in hand, with Farah crowding in behind him. The sea captain thrust her back and stabbed at the huge hornet as it buzzed by on its deadly mission. The insect turned, made a swipe at Sinbad, who stepped back quickly. He fell over a fallen chest, his swordhand striking the sharp edge of a ruptured instrument case. The scimitar fell into the narrow spaces between the chests as the baboon screamed from its overturned cage.

"The locket!" cried Melanthius, struggling to get up.

The seabird had paused in the stern window, watching. Melanthius fell across the bunk as the hornet turned noisily for another attack. Sinbad saw the insect aiming for the old man. He jumped across the cabin and snatched up Farah's unfinished fur jacket and flailed away with it at the hornet, who banked off and circled for another attack.

Again Sinbad swept the jacket at the insect, which dodged deftly and came at Sinbad from the back. Trapped underfoot by the tumble of cases and scrolls, Sinbad ducked, throwing himself under the protection of the table. The hornet struck the table, making it quiver, and knocking the wax tablet, the scrolls, and the retort to the floor. The retort broke as Sinbad saw the knife, still sticking in the deck where it had fallen. He seized it gratefully and rolled from under the table.

Armed with the knife, Sinbad slashed at the hornet as it dived at him. The hornet swung away and Sinbad saw the seagull sitting in the stern window, watching, the locket in its beak.

"We need the locket!" cried Melanthius. "Kill the bird first!"

"Ishtar!" Sinbad swore and reversed the knife in his hand, preparatory to throwing it. But the hornet dove again and Sinbad selected the new target. Holding the knife by the blade tip, he threw it hard. The knife turned only once before it sliced into the carapace of

the insect, throwing it against the cabin wall where it stuck to the beam.

The seagull squawked and flew away through the window. Sinbad slumped against the table, staring at the bird winging its way south.

Both Farah and Dione ran into the cabin. Farah to set the baboon's cage upright, while Dione helped her father to his feet. Sinbad jumped to the porthole. "Gone . . ." he muttered.

Farah said, "Praise to Allah that you are unhurt."

Sinbad took a deep breath and turned to look at the shambles left in the cabin. Melanthius was leaning against the table, reaching for the bolted-down chair. With Dione's help he fell heavily into it. The old man brushed a hand wearily across his face. "Alas . . I underestimated the powers of Zenobia . . . and I fear I threw away a chance for Kassim." He looked gloomily at the baboon. "I am profoundly sorry." The baboon began to chitter and shake the cage and the old man nodded. He sighed. "Try to calm him, Dione."

Sinbad reached up and tugged at his knife, impaled in the dead monster insect. He tugged it loose and flipped the ugly oversized carcass out the porthole. The rover captain cleaned his knife as he said, "Speed becomes all the more essential now . . . with Zenobia behind us."

Melanthius nodded. "Or ahead . . . who knows?" He looked at Sinbad with an expression of apology. "You were right, Captain. We should have killed her." The magician shrugged. He sighed and indicated the wrecked cases and boxes. "No point, in keeping any of this any longer." He picked up a piece of smashed equipment. "No use to anyone now."

"Overboard?" Sinbad asked.

"Yes . . . overboard."

The old man threw the broken piece of equipment out the porthole, then set briskly about the business of sorting and discarding the ruined material.

Princess Farah asked gently, "You don't want to turn back . . . ?"

The old man looked up at her with a frown. "Certainly not! I've been outwitted by very few people during my lifetime and never before by a woman!" He threw a small wrecked case deftly through the open port. "Well, she hasn't won yet!"

The baboon grew noisy again and even Dione drew back in surprise. The bearded Casgar sage sighed. "Best from now on to keep him locked in his cage . . . he's becoming more savage."

Dione looked up at her father. "That was a cry of anguish."

Farah exchanged a worried glance with Sinbad, but his expression changed to a more happy one and he made a gesture behind the back of the old man, one that indicated all would be well. But when Sinbad turned back toward the porthole his expression was fleetingly that of a worried and concerned man.

CHAPTER 15

Rafi paced the poop deck of the gleaming metal ship, plucking at his thin beard with nervous hands. His dark, suspicious eyes flicked over the western skies and his boots rang angrily on the metal deck. He paused to look at the huge Minaton, steadily rowing the ship, but the sight of the wondrous metal man did nothing for him.

The young man struck the metal railing with a balled fist and grunted angrily. He stood a moment, eyes closed, face contorted into a mask of worry and fear. Then his eyes popped open and he whirled around.

There was the whispery beat of wings over the sound of the sea and Rafi's face broke into a wide, triumphant smile. A large seabird landed on the metal rail. Rafi took an impulsive step forward, then stopped. The bird was turning away . . . it could be any seabird . . .

The seagull waddled around on the rail to face him and Rafi's face again shone with happiness. In its beak was the crystal locket.

Rafi stepped to the bird and very gently picked it up. It was trembling, almost quivering, but Rafi did not know whether it was fear, fatigue, or excitement. Gently, he carried the bird down into the main cabin and set it down carefully upon the divan. He knelt on the floor and took the locket into his beringed fingers.

He stared at the locket, his face drained of color. Blinking, horrified at how little of the elixir was left, he stumbled over the words. "E-enough? Is . . . is there e-enough?"

Urgently, he poured the last blood-red drops onto the palm of his hand and held it up to the beak of the white seabird. The gull pecked at the elixir until it was gone, then Rafi stood and moved back against the cabin bulkhead.

The lean, handsome young man stared in horrified fascination as the seagull spread its wings wide. Sweat poured down his face and an expression of pain crossed his lean cheeks. Fear gripped him.

"If . . . if anything g-goes w-wrong . . ."

Unable to watch, Rafi turned and pressed himself against the smooth metal panels of the cabin, his eyes bulging but seeing nothing. He heard the bird squawk and a tremor passed over his body. He blinked and saw wisps of green smoke drifting through part of the

cabin he was looking at. He heard a heavy heartbeat and Rafi jammed his eyes closed and pressed his fists into his ears. Another tremor shook his body. He heard a sound and whirled around, wide-eyed and fearful, his hands shaking.

With a rash his anxiety gave way to relief. On the divan, lying back with her eyes shut, was Zenobia. A green, smoky mist hovered around her, but was disappearing quickly. Rafi knelt at his mother's side, his expression returning again to anxiety. She looked exhausted.

Rafi leaned over and kissed her, then ran his hands lovingly over her cheeks and throat, his anxiety dissolving into concern. He looked along her limp, slim body, seeing that everything was all right . . . then froze in terror.

"Uhh!" He jammed a fist into his mouth, biting down painfully upon his knuckles. He jerked his head around to stare at his mother's face as she stirred. She opened her eyes and looked at him, then her own eyes mirrored his fear. Zenobia raised her head and looked down, as Rafi's terrified face revealed that something was monstrously wrong.

Both of them stared with horror at the hem of Zenobia's dress. There was one bare ankle and foot protruding beyond, but the other foot had remained a claw, a huge, cruel, taloned claw, a monstrous bird's foot.

Zenobia's head fell back as she cried out in a hoarse, despairing whisper, "Not enough . . . not enough . . ."

Her clawing fingers found the crystal locket and she threw it wildly, uttering a harsh, almost animal-like cry of pain and frustration. The locket shattered a mirror as Rafi let out a piercing cry of pain.

Reflected in the shattered mirror, Rafi's hysterical cries echoed off the metal cabin walls, his face distorting, his hands digging into the fabric of his tunic, clawing at the flesh of his breast.

"Not enough . . . not enough!" he sobbed.

"It's getting colder," Hassan grumbled.

Sinbad nodded, his eyes on the slashing slate-gray seas ahead. "Those furs they are making will be needed."

The burly Hassan jerked a thumb at the distant, mist-shrouded coastline to the starboard. "Who could live in weather like this? They must be frost giants, or witches!" He stared gloomily at the gray-green shoreline. "Men were not meant to have skin like dead fish and to see the sun only rarely."

His captain cocked an eye at the hazy sun. "It gets lower in the sky with each day."

“Aye, and the moon waxes and wanes all too fast,” Hassan added.

Bahadin, at the helm behind them, called out, “Sinbad! Is it much further? A few more days of this and I’ll not be able to move!”

Sinbad grinned back at his helmsman. “Steady to the north, sailor. We have not yet gotten to the hard part!”

Hassan groaned, then looked into the gray-slate sky. “You, up there . . . never let me leave the Aegean or the Mediterranean sun again!”

The bronze-muscled Minaton steadily rowed the metal vessel northward, deep into the wake of Sibad’s ship. Within Zenobia’s cabin, her fingers and those of her son’s lightly touched a small model ship on a Ouija navigation board. The witch was sitting so that the folds of her dress covered her clawed foot. Her eyes were closed as she took her fingers from the miniature ship.

Gathering parchment sheets and a pen she began to reproduce the text and diagrams she had memorized from Melanthius’s scroll. Rafi looked on with rapt attention, watching the charts develop, and the strange text appear scratchily upon the paper.

His mother opened her eyes when she had finished and critically inspected her work. “The writing will take time to decipher . . . but look . . . the chart is clear.”

“The Valley?” Rafi asked, turning one of his ornate rings around and around his finger.

Zenobia pointed, then moved her finger and stabbed at a marking. “And here the Shrine that girl Dione spoke of, the healing Shrine.” Her eyes flashed and her mouth was set in a determined line. “This is where we must go.”

“We . . . ?”

Zenobia looked starkly at her son. “To restore my foot. It is my only chance. Only there, in the Shrine.” She nodded her dark head in remembrance. “No wonder the apothecary of Alexandria demanded so much gold.” Her gaze went to the map. “The liquid must have come originally from Hyperborea.”

Rafi leaned forward and touched his mother’s arm. “If the Shrine will heal you . . . then it might cure Kassim . . .”

“We will be there first.” She gestured forward. “We have the Minaton. We have a boat of bronze and brass that will cut through the strongest ice.” Her fist slammed down on the table. “We *must* be first!”

It took her a moment to control her fury, but at last she lifted an arm to her son. “Help me,” she said. Leaning on him, she limped toward the cabin door, her clawed foot scraping across the burnished

metal deck. Neither she nor Rafi looked at it.

The Minaton rowed steadily on, repeating and repeating endlessly the same rowing motions. The oars beat at the sea, propelling the shining metal craft like a knife through the water.

Rafi looked ahead. The sky shaded into gray, into boils of slate and mountains of blackish storm clouds.

The lookout on Sinbad's ship was muffled in a heavy hood and jacket sewn from furs and skins. He clung to the crow's nest, bracing his back against one side and grasping the wooden sides of the tublike structure near the top of the mast with heavily mittened hands. The ship rolled from side to side and dipped its sharp prow into the salty water, sending chill sprays back over the ship.

The mast and shrouds were coated in a thin veneer of frost and ice. The sail was free of the freezing moisture because of the snapping and billowing, which cracked and dispelled the ice as it formed. Below the decks, cabin, railing, and all parts of the ship were covered in more ice and frost, which was growing with each minute as the sea spray enveloped the ship. The lookout knew that soon men would have to come out of the cabins and hack away at the ice, not only to relieve the ship of the weight, but so that the ropes and lines would be free enough to properly use the sails.

He batted at his eyebrows and thick black beard, cracking off the ice that had formed on them. Suddenly he stopped and grabbed the forward edge of the crow's nest to peer through the spray, the mist, and the tipping, rising, billowing sea. He turned and shouted back to the helmsman, another ice-covered figure on the afterdeck.

"Ahead . . . ! Ahead! Dead ahead!" He took another deep breath and bellowed out his discovery. "The ice!"

Sinbad came from the cabin at once, shrugging into a heavy fur coat. "Where away?" he called to the lookout.

The lookout pointed straight ahead and Sinbad joined his crew in going to the railing.

What they saw was a fantastic alien seascape . . . in whites and grays, in ice-blues and slate seas, in mist and sharp-edged mountains. The drifting icebergs were as tall as the ship . . . and taller, rising above them like mountains. They were low and swept smooth and clean by the winds. They were steep and sharp, rugged and raw, great chunks of frozen water ripped from a continent of ice. Some had been melted by vagrant winds and warmer suns, shaped into fantastic shapes from nightmares, frozen monsters of dirty white. Holes and caves were pierced into the mountains that drifted so slowly, so

magnificently unconcerned with the affairs of man, or even the tides of the seas that would eventually destroy them, shrinking them with the sun and wind, splitting them into smaller and smaller blocks until they melted into the seas of the world and disappeared as entities.

Sinbad called down to Princess Farah and Dione. “Come, see the great ice mountains! You, too, Melanthius!”

Bundled into furs, they groped their way over the slippery decks and held to the railings as the ship sailed into the valleys between the mountains of ice. The sea was less rough here, broken by the great ice blocks, smoothed into rolling water. For a long time Farah, Sinbad, Dione, and her father just looked at the spectacle all around them, silently pointing at one or another fantastically shaped block of ice.

“Look, a temple!” Farah said with delight. “Oh, and some kind of great beast! Oh, Sinbad, look over there! Doesn’t that look like a woman . . . or . . . no, a crouching panther . . . no . . .”

Sinbad laughed. “They look different from each direction. A few feet farther on you see them as something else.”

“They’re beautiful,” she said in a whisper.

“And deadly,” the sea captain added. “They are like rocks to hit, then sometimes turn over . . . or pieces fall off . . . or they split and flip over, taking any hapless ship close by right with them!”

“But they are still fantastic . . . and beautiful!” insisted Farah, and Sinbad nodded agreement.

“Yes, and beautiful. Only we won’t steer any closer to them than we must.”

They watched for a while longer until Melanthius spoke up. “By my calculations,” he said, “we’ve judged our arrival to within a hair’s breadth . . .”

The royal princess stared ahead, squinting against the icy wind. “How much further . . . ?”

Melanthius shrugged and hugged the heavy furs around him. “As far north as possible. We must try to sail for at least another four days.”

“Four days!” Sinbad said, looking at the thickening blocks of ice. “And a fourth full moon . . .”

The old man nodded. “The less distance we have to cover on foot the better.”

Sinbad, grim-faced but professional, shook his head. “Four days . . . ?” He, too, looked ahead at the dim gray horizon as they all sought to estimate the distance they could go by ship. “I doubt if we’ll be able to continue for more than four *hours.*” He waved his arm around at the ice-shrouded vessel. “My ship was never built to battle through

conditions like these. Before long . . ." He jabbed a finger ahead. "The sea itself will freeze over. I've heard stories of ships caught by the ice . . . and crushed!"

Farah bit at her lovely lips, then gasped as a chunk of ice as big as the ship sailed dangerously close. Sinbad jumped to the ladder leading up to the poop deck and quickly scanned the sea ahead. There were icebergs, large and small, coming at them, drifting down from the vast polar cap.

"Careful, Bahadin," he said.

"Aye, Captain," the helmsman answered.

Sinbad knew his capable helmsman was doing his best. To avoid one iceberg it was sometimes necesary to sail close to another. The high cliffs of ice sailed by on either side, huge silent frost mountains. The ship wove its way through the bergs carefully, propelled by the stiff Arctic winds.

There was a rumble and Sinbad looked up through the ice-covered shrouds to see great blocks of ice falling from the white cliffs into the freezing sea below. The water splashed onto Sinbad's ship and the waves rocked the ship dangerously. The thunder echoed off the other icebergs and brought down another avalanche of crumbling ice into the deep blue sea.

The wooden ship, which had once seemed sturdy and strongly built to Sinbad and now seemed to be made of paper as the great forces of nature concentrated on it, maneuvered through the chunks of frozen water torn from the eternal mantle of the North.

Another great cracking sound was heard and everyone looked up at the iceberg which towered over them. Wind and sun had carved a dangerous undercut and the iceberg resembled a frozen wave of seawater. The tip of the wave was cracking and Sinbad yelled a command at his helmsman. "Port! Hard aport!"

The ice broke away, falling down in a rustling, crackling, slither of sound, cannonading into the sea, where seconds before Sinbad's ship had been sailing. The tidal wave from the falling ice rocked the ship badly, and the crew and passengers clung desperately to the iced railings and lines, their feet sliding from under them on the slanted, icy deck. The wooden ship creaked and ice showered down from the shrouds and sail, pelting those below with hard-edged shards.

"Starboard!" ordered Sinbad, and the ship twisted on the crest of the wave, leaning over, bumping against bobbing chunks of ice.

"Look!" Dione said, and pointed.

"Captain!" cried the lookout, clinging to the wildly heaving crow's

nest. “A cave in the ice ahead!”

Melanthius thrust back his fur hood to get a better look. Ahead of them was an almost solid wall of ice, with a jagged serpentine edge that squiggled away in both directions. In the face of that sheer cliff was a great ragged hole, a triangular shark’s mouth of a cave, heavily hung with stalactites and shading off into a deep and sinister darkness.

“Exactly as described in the scrolls,” Melanthius said. “The cave there is the entrance to the tunnel.”

Sinbad frowned as he studied the approaching cave. Behind them ice still cascaded down from the precipitous icebergs. “No way through for us,” he said. “The ice is too thick. It would crack a wooden ship like a walnut in a vice.”

Melanthius withdrew a scroll from an inner pocket and attempted to study it as the ship rolled. Farah helped steady him as Sinbad continued his inspection.

“A warmer current, coming down through there, must keep the cave open, else it would come and go and not be a feature on an ancient map.”

Melanthius got Sinbad’s attention and his finger traced a route across the scroll. “The longer route,” he said. “It’s the only way.”

Sinbad nodded. “Helmsman!” he shouted and pointed the direction. The ship heeled over and took the new tack. The ice still fell, now a constant thunder and splash. Ahead of them there was a snowfall from the top edge of the great wall of ice, then an ear-splitting crack like a great explosion. A mountain of ice broke away from the ice pack and rocked free, setting up more waves. Chunks and drift snow fell from the newly born iceberg as it rocked. There was a scream from Farah as the iceberg started to tilt and Sinbad grabbed at her, holding her waist with one strong arm while he seized the railing with the other.

The berg tipped—then with a slow majesty overturned. The huge dripping bottom came up, spilling chill water in foaming waves, and the new iceberg found its center of balance. Pointed and smoothed by the water, the bottom that was now the top was smaller than the part that had now submerged itself. The pointed iceberg started to drift away, beginning its journey of destruction southward.

Farah sighed within Sinbad’s arm and the ship sailed over the ice-strewn waters where the berg had been moments before.

“Steady as she goes!” Sinbad sang out.

Aboo-seer ran forward with a hefty pike, in case they had to shove ice cakes out of the way. Hassan began ordering men into the ice-covered shrouds to take in sail. Melanthius watched, his fur hood

flecked with ice, condensed from his plumes of warm breath.

“We have less than three moons left . . .” he said.

The ship sailed on, into the Arctic world of ice and danger.

Zenobia’s ship cut through the slate-colored Arctic waters smoothly. The drifting chunks of ice made loud clanging sounds as they struck the metal sides of the swiftly moving ship or bounced noisily off the sharp prow as it raced northward.

The Minaton’s metal arms pumped remorselessly, tirelessly. But from the main cabin there was a single, wretched sob.

CHAPTER 16

A black rock thrust up through the ice. It seemed to be the only object in miles that was not icy water or frozen water. Near it Sinbad's ship was embedded, her wooden prow caught by the ice, but with her stern still in the cold but unfrozen ocean. Sinbad went over the side of his ship, using a rope ladder, and dropped onto the solid, cold surface of the ice pack itself.

He stood and looked around. The mountainous ice pack had thinned and lowered here, no doubt due to the land beneath, for the biggest portion of the pack was on the sea. More of Sinbad's crew came over the railing and down the ladder, carrying supplies. They trudged past him, kicking up puffs of loose snow on the top of the hard ice. Sinbad followed them toward the blazing bonfire at the edge of the black rock.

The captain stepped into the circle of melted snow, a muddy dish that surrounded the fire, and held out his hands to the flames. He pulled off the mittens and rubbed his cold hands together.

Near him, close to the fire, was the baboon, huddling with a blanket and looking miserable. Next to the animal was Princess Farah, wrapped in her fur garments, and beyond Dione, equally swathed in thick fur garments, was Melanthius, who was studying the parchment map. The crew was huddled around the small fire, with stores, sledges, and equipment piled in a semi-circle to act as a windbreak. Maroof covered the baboon's cage after giving him a piece of meat. Aboo-seer looked up as Melanthius spoke to him. He handed over the requested chest and the Casgarian sage took a measuring device from it. "Thank you," he said to the sailor as he set the device to a legend on the map. He measured a distance on the parchment then looked up as Sinbad approached. "It is a long journey through desolate and frozen terrain," he said. "I was hoping we could have used the first route. It would have been shorter."

"And more dangerous," Sinbad said, crouching down. The wind cut through even the thick fur garments and he was already stiff. "This way is all on foot . . . but it is the only way."

Melanthius nodded. "It will take several days. We must set out at once."

Sinbad nodded. "As soon as we've loaded the sledges." He looked

around at his cold, already tired crew and pointed at Aboo-seer. "You will remain here, in command of the ship. But I will need four men to come with us." His grin was wide and his teeth very white. "Four *good* men, strong and determined."

The line of sailors was silent. Their faces were weary. Ice stuck to the beards of many. Lit by the flickering flames of the bonfire, Sinbad could see that they were impassive, and some were even hostile.

Farah spoke up in a clear voice. "My uncle Balsora, the Regent, will reward you when we return to Charak."

Hassan grunted. *"If* we return . . ."

Farah stood up, her hands out in a gesture of pleading. "All the gold you can carry. Enough to buy any one of you a ship of his own . . ."

Hassan snorted loudly. "If *I* ever get back to Charak, I'm never going to put to sea again!"

Some of Hassan's bearded companions laughed, but most just stared, resentful and ugly with cold. Then Sinbad stepped closer to the fire.

"Then buy yourself a caravan of camels, or a half-dozen wives." He grinned. "You'll have to do something to pass the time if you give up the sea."

The sailors laughed and Hassan spoke in a lighter tone. "Six wives?"

"As many as you like," Sinbad said with an expansive gesture. "The most beautiful girls in Arabia. All perfect, with skin like honey and dark, loving eyes. And all for your delight and pleasure!" The firelight glinted off teeth bared in wolfish, lustful smiles. "Or dark maidens from Africa, sleek and lean . . . slanted-eyed beauties from Cathay, trained in the most exotic arts . . . blonde fire maidens from the Norselands . . .

Hassan jumped to his feet, his weariness gone. He waved his mittened hand at his fellow crewmen. "Let's load up the sledges!"

Maroof, Bahadin the helmsman, and Ali were chosen with Hassan. The rest of the sailors jumped to their feet, laughing and trading rough jests about another's ability to satisfy even one wife, much less a half dozen.

Sinbad turned away from the fire. His eyes locked with those of the princess. She seemed aloof, cold, perhaps offended by Sinbad's appeal to their lustful natures. But then she smiled, a soft and knowing smile, and her long lashes covered her eyes demurely.

Sinbad smiled and began to lash bundles to a sledge.

The tundra was a vast, bleak deserted wilderness of snow, ice, with an occasional jagged dark rock protruding sharply. The tiny figures of the expedition moved slowly across the stark landscape, dwarfed by the immensity of the chill terrain. The stores were loaded onto two sledges, lashed down against the bumps and wind, each sledge hauled by two sailors. The baboon was riding on the rear sledge, just ahead of Farah. Melanthius and Dione tradged along wearily, automatically behind her. The sledges made little sound, and all was silent, except for the keening of the freezing Arctic wind.

Sinbad was in the lead, watching for cracks, canyons filled in by drifting snow, and other hidden dangers. The wind increased in force, whipping more snow into a blinding, featureless shroud of dirty white, which isolated them from the world. Sinbad shouldered into the wind, tapping the ice ahead of them with a spear.

Flurries of snow hid one sledge from another for long moments, but they struggled ahead regardless. The travelers bent their heads into the furious wind and battled on, looking up only now and again to orient themselves.

Sinbad stopped and wiped the snow and ice from his eyebrows, peering into the blizzard with narrowed eyes. Ahead was a huge frozen lake, an immense expanse of bleak, endless ice. The snowfall increased, blocking out the sight. Sinbad turned and hollered into the falling snow.

“Come on! We’ll make camp just ahead!”

The grateful sledge haulers heaved into their pulling straps, sliding the heavy loads over the snow, then down an incline toward the snow-shrouded shore. Sinbad saw Melanthius and Farah fall behind and battled through the snow drifts to grasp their arms and help them get down to the campsite.

The wind continued and the snow stung their faces as the four crewmen and Sinbad unloaded some of the stores and tipped the sledges on their sides to act as windbreakers. Sinbad helped Farah and Dione down under blankets, in the most protected spot behind the sledges, then checked Melanthius, who was snugged in. They all chewed dried meat and fell quickly into the blank sleep of exhaustion.

The storm raged on, burying the sleeping figures in a mantle of white.

The brass ship of the sorceress Zenobia cut cleanly through the mountainous dark-purple waves. The wind-bred spume that whipped whitely from the wave tops shot like arrows across the glistening wet deck. The Minaton’s massive arms moved relentlessly, driving the

brazen vessel northward.

Rafi huddled in the shelter of the cabin doorway, wrapped in a heavy robe, watching disconsolately as his mother paced the deck. She was drenched, and the wet wind plastered strands of her long black hair across her face like snakes driven mad. He chewed at the inside of his mouth as he watched her pace back and forth, back and forth, like some sort of tiger.

The fur of her leopard- and tigerskin robe was soaked but she limped up and down, up and down, her clawed foot scraping against the smooth metal deck. Rafi sighed. He would not get to eat until she tired of being on watch. He never got to do *anything* until his mother was ready for it.

But that would change when *he* was Caliph!

There was a crackfing of ice and a monstrous beast, shaped like a giant sack, rose from the snow. It had teeth as long as swords, two great downward-thrusting ivory shafts as long as a woman's arm. It bellowed and the men dropped the straps of the sledges and groped for their swords.

"A walrus!" Hassan shouted.

"Food!" cried Sinbad.

The walrus was bigger than any they had ever seen or heard of before, but they were also further north than any sailor they had known about. The great lumbering beast lurched out of the pocket of ice and snow in which it had been lying and bellowed at the intruders.

Sinbad waved at Melanthius. "Get the princess back!" He pointed at Dione, who was frozen with surprise. "Dione! Get back!"

The princess of Charak ran to the sledge and freed the fur-covered cage of the baboon and lugged it shakily to a safe distance, followed by Dione, who was helping her father. Sinbad's men were fanning out as he shouted commands.

"Use anything you can! Spears, axes, anything!" He looked back at Melanthius and the two women. They were getting well out of danger, so Sinbad seized a spear from a sledge. The baboon's gibbering and shrieking was heard even over the crackling of ice, and Sinbad heard Dione's calming words only faintly as he advanced.

Hassan grabbed a net from the nearest sledge, which they had used to hold down the stores. He cut it loose with a few slashes of his sharp knife and spun it wide, giving Sinbad a wolfish grin.

"This will slow it down!"

Sinbad pulled a spear from the cluster on the first sledge, for a

sword would do little against the heavy fur, thick hide, and, more importantly, the layers of insulating fat. Hassan trotted across the snow and spun the net expertly, spreading it for the cast.

"Watch out!" cried out Maroof, falling back under the waddling lunge of the great beast of the North. Hassan ran forward and cast the net, catching the walrus on the first throw. The fat animal bellowed angrily and pulled back, pulling Hassan along. Two of the men threw down their weapons to grab at the net, running to the side to engulf the lumbering creature in the folds.

But the walrus backed away, ducking, twisting, and the net slipped over his head. Hassan and the others tumbled backwards. Sinbad called out and threw a spear to Hassan, who was closest, then picked up one of the discarded spears from the snowdrift. The walrus, still snorting, advanced again. All the sailors attacked it, jabbing upward at the great gray creature with their relatively puny swords and spears. The gigantic creature continued to advance, crashing through them to smash their precious stores of food and equipment with each wave of its big flippers, with each slashing blow from its massive tusks, and with each ponderous slither of its tremendous, whalelike body. The swords and spears were useless. Nothing could deter it. Its thick gray armor of blubber absorbed everything.

"Swords, spears, useless," panted Sinbad. "Hassan! Maroof! Try the net again!"

"I'll try for the mouth!" shouted Bahadin, closing in for a throw, hoping to go right into the open, bellowing mouth, bypassing the folds of blubber and striking the monster in a vulnerable spot.

"No! Wait!" cried Maroof, but it was too late.

The spear went true, but the great sea beast closed his mouth, catching the spear and suffering only minor damage. The walrus spat out the spear as he backed up, and Bahadin ran forward to grab it up and try again.

"Bahadin!" Sinbad cried. "Watch out! The ice is . . . !" But his warning was too late. There was the terrible sound of cracking and the ice split. A huge shelf ripped loose and tilted up. Snow and chunks of shattered ice cascaded down. Bahadin lost his balance and fell, but not before the great ivory tusks slashed into him, throwing him screaming over the edge. The Helmsman struck the dark water below and vanished at once. The walrus lurched and the ice shelf tipped, crashing back down, sealing forever the fate of Bahadin in the icy water. The shelf broke into pieces and the walrus waddled onto firmer footing.

In the shelter of the uptilted sledge Dione drew her dagger and

started forward. But her father grabbed her. “No! You’d only be in the way!”

Farah added her protest to that of Dione, who was struggling to free herself. “But we cannot just stand by . . . !”

“Pray!” the old alchemist snapped. “Just pray to all the gods you’ve ever heard of!”

Dione still struggled. “If they need us, we must help!”

Sinbad let out a fearsome yell, something he had found that animals often reacted to. Although not afraid, the walrus hesitated, trying to evaluate this new menace. Sinbad ran in close, his arm cocked, and he threw the spear with all his might.

The point buried itself in the neck of the creature, which lurched back, bellowing. It turned and began running off, laboring and spurting blood. Somehow Sinbad’s spear had penetrated deep enough to sever an artery and the bellowing creature was hurt badly.

But the wound only made the walrus more angry. A sudden charge sent all the sailors running back. Sinbad grabbed a coil of rope and advanced again upon the huge animal. “The net,” he snapped to the remaining sailors. Maroof and Hassan spread the net between them and advanced in Sinbad’s wake.

The walrus turned toward Sinbad, roaring, and slithered and flopped over the rough ice blocks toward him. Sinbad shook out a loop of rope and swung it twice around his head before he threw. The rope looped around one of the creature’s long flippers. Sinbad ran to one side, out of the walrus’s direct charge, and dug in his heels to heave with all his might.

The rope slipped tight and the flipper was caught in the loop. The walrus lurched, hurling Sinbad in a wide arc, and he clung to the taut line of rope. Sinbad fell with a great explosion of breath, but he held on and dug in his feet again.

“Maroof!”

The big black sailor joined his captain and took the rope. “Keep him off balance if you can,” Sinbad said, and ran to join Hassan. With the net they advanced cautiously toward the walrus, who loomed over them almost as large as an elephant. The gray monster’s attention was split between the advancing humans and the constant tug on his flipper. He tried running toward Maroof, but the sailor ran faster, always keeping the line taut.

The great flashing tusks swept the air above Sinbad and Hassan and they dodged and slid around on the glassy-surfaced ice with the cargo net spread between them. They inched forward, then leapt back as the

great tusks struck at them. They dodged and the ivory swords gouged furrows in the ice at their feet.

"Now!" Sinbad cried. "As high as you can! Now, Hassan—*now!*" They hurled the net into the air.

The web circled the plunging head of the monster walrus and Hassan pulled with all his strength on a corner of it. The walrus twisted his head, but only entangled himself and his long tusks in the netting. Sinbad shouted with joy and ran to the overturned sledge for an axe. Sinbad gripped the cold wooden handle of the axe and advanced toward the bellowing walrus, now caught between the tethered flipper and the encompassing net.

Farah, watching from behind the upended sledge, bit at her lip, then felt the ice give away beneath her. She jumped back, looking down. Dione, too, felt the ice cracking and they pulled Melanthius to his feet, then both scrambled for the baboon cage as the cracks continued to open in the ice.

"Sinbad!" Farah cried.

But the axe-bearing ship's captain did not see her predicament. He swung the heavy axe over his head, striking at the monster's eyes and face. The walrus roared in agony and pulled Hassan to his knees. Spurting blood stained the snow in a wide circle.

The wounded walrus, bellowing and snorting, gathered new strength. He twisted, throwing Hassan again and yanking Maroof onto his face. The walrus started for the hole in the ice where Bahadin had fallen in. Maroof cried out as the rope he was holding yanked him along, swinging him painfully around, for the line had caught his ankle in the twisting.

Hassan released the net as he tumbled into a crevice, but Sinbad saw Maroof's situation and bounded over the blood-spattered ice blocks toward him. "Hold fast!" he shouted.

But the frantic, dying beast proved too much for Maroof as he grabbed at handholds that broke off in his fingers. The beast reached the hole in a final slither of ice and gushing blood and dropped in with a roar, splashing chill water in every direction. Sinbad skidded on the wet ice and fell, but his arm went out, bringing down the axe with one last desperate slash.

The axe cut through the slithering rope a hairs-breath from Maroof's foot. The rope disappeared forever into the Arctic sea, and the big black sailor grabbed desperately at outcroppings to keep his momentum from taking him into a freezing death.

Panting, Sinbad and Maroof looked at the dark surface of the water. There were bubbles . . . and a lot of blood.

The ice settled down and Melanthius hurried over to them, followed by Farah and Dione, who set down the fur-covered baboon cage at a distance. The old Greek looked at the bloody surface of the pool and sighed.

"Too bad you couldn't hold him. I would have liked to examine the creature. Walrus Giganticus, you know." He peered at their strained and exhausted faces. "Prehistoric."

Sinbad wiped his face and got shakily to his feet. "My profound apologies," he said with a slight bow. "Next time . . . I will try harder."

Farah helped Maroof to his feet. "Are you hurt?" she asked.

The big black man shook his head. "It is said a man has only one life. Now I have two. I owe them both to Captain Sinbad."

Hassan came up, shaken but well. He laughed at Maroof. "I have never seen a black man turn white before!"

Maroof laughed with him, then sobered as a part of Bahadin's clothes popped to the surface.

"The walrus might have killed us all," Hassan said.

Sinbad shook his head. "We were the invaders. We surprised him. He might have run off had he seen us at a distance."

"Aye," conceded Hassan, "but we still need food."

"We almost *were* food," Maroof said.

Sinbad laughed and slapped the battered black sailor on the shoulder. "Whatever beast that eats you, my friend—I hope he likes tough meat!"

"He won't have to salt me," the dark sailor grinned. "And I hope I make his stomach hurt!"

"Where's Ali?" Hassan grumbled. "We have a lot of work to do, cleaning up . . ."

"Look!" They followed Farah's finger and saw a dark figure on the surface of the ice, crumpled and still. "Ali!"

His chest was crushed. The great weight and muscled flippers of the walrus had killed him and everyone felt guilty because they hadn't noticed.

CHAPTER 17

The wall of ice loomed over Zenobia's metal boat in a cliff of endless white. It curved off in both directions across their path as the Minaton propelled them toward it with effortless, perpetual labor at the oar-mechanism. Zenobia and Rafi, swathed in thick furs, stood at the railing, staring at the line of ice cliffs ahead.

"No sign of a tunnel through these cliffs," Rafi said with annoyance. "They look as impenetrable as the Walls of Byzantium."

Impatiently, Zenobia gestured at the ice wall. "The chart in the scroll is precise. There *is* an entrance." She glowered to the right and left, her clawed foot scratching on the icy deck. "I mean to find it."

The witch-woman raised her arms, spreading them wide, her dark eyes glaring. She spoke as if uttering an incantation. "Minaton! My Minaton! By Hecate and by all the powers of the Lord of Iron and Brass, by the Great Hephaestus to whom I have pledged my soul! Faster!" Her voice came out as a screech, her face framed in the tiger hood she wore, her eyes glinting with demonic concentration. "Faster! *Faster!*"

The great golden bull-headed figure picked up the pace, his metallic labors increasing. The ship moved faster and faster as the speed increased. The oars beat at the icy dark waters. The sharp metal prow cut faster through the thin layer of ice that covered the slate-colored waters, crinkling and crushing and breaking. The sound was a crystal chittering in the frigid air, a tinkling, cracking, slicing sound. Zenobia's gleaming metal ship raced toward the wall of ice.

Rafi was in a panic. With staring eyes he screeched at his mother, "Order the Minaton to stop! Mother! Stop it!"

"No!" his mother screamed back. The floating chunks of ice were hitting against the speeding hull like booming gongs now. Rafi clutched at the railing, staring wildly.

"Sail on! Sail on!" Zenobia screamed, her eyes glinting with demonic concentration. The impassive bull figure labored on, its powerful metal arms churning the air. The ship's sharp prow sliced through the dark Arctic waters cleanly.

Rafi's stare grew fixed, watching the ship speed through the icebergs and floating islands of ice, racing along the great white wall of frozen death at an alarming rate. Quietly, he whimpered.

Sinbad paused on the ridge, knee deep in fresh snow. Below, a long broad snowdrift, unmarked by man or beast, led down to a glacial valley. He frowned, seeing wisps of mist coming from the ground ahead. He beckoned Melanthius forward from his trailing position as the two-sledge expedition moved down the slope toward the valley floor.

The sailor pointed at the mist, which they could now see was hot vapor rising from cracks in the rocky land. "How is it possible?" Sinbad asked. "What is this?"

"They are called funerals," the Greek wise man answered.

"So much heat amid so much snow and ice?" Sinbad asked in wonder. The snow and ice were melted well back from each rift in the rocks.

"The source must be deep down under the surface of the earth," the old Greek said, peering at each passing funeral vent.

Sinbad scratched at the ice on his beard. "The secret of the Arimaspi?" he suggested. "Could they have found a way to harness such heat?"

Melanthius looked up brightly at the ship's captain, his bearded face breaking into a wide grin. "Excellent, Captain Sinbad! I'll make a philosopher of you yet!" Then his smile faded. "But the truth is, I don't know. Perhaps the Shrine will reveal the mystery to us."

They descended into the shallow valley and crossed it, making a wide track in the snow. The next valley was deeper, with the far side steeper and more difficult to scale. The next valley was deeper and surrounded by even higher hills. They camped that night in the bottom of that valley, against the bare, gray-black rock that was becoming increasingly more evident.

They found a niche in the rock and did not need to tip over their sledges. The weary sailors dropped almost where they stopped, and Farah, Sinbad, Dione, and her father built a fire and ladled out bowels of hot soup and shreds of dried meat.

Sinbad stood the first watch, too excited to sleep despite his tired muscles. Ahead, he thought, just ahead. The appearance of the hot vapors, the increasing frequency of cold but uniced areas, the steeper hills, rapidly rising to mountains—all these things were signs that Sinbad took as good. A secret valley would need protection from the fierce Arctic winds, he thought. And perhaps the volcanic gasses were the answer. An island of warmth in a sea of ice.

The veteran sailor thought back to the legends he had heard, fanciful tales of secret valleys hidden away in steaming jungles, in icy wastes, even the legend of Atlantis, Lemuria, and Mu still somehow

existing under the seas that swallowed them. Sinbad would have once denied the possibility of such strange things, but his experiences of the last few years had taught him that legends had a basis in fact, that myths were sometimes only distorted truths, often old and elaborated upon, but still true.

Hyperborea. Perhaps tomorrow, he thought, perhaps tomorrow . . .

Sinbad struggled up the rocky slope, trying not to dislodge stones that would roll back upon the rest of the expedition. He paused for breath, looking back at the figures hauling on the sledges below. Even Farah and Dione were helping, though they had all forbidden the old man from trying to assist.

Below, behind were the descending ridges, each capped with more and more ice and snow until the distant hills were white, blending in with the great wasteland of the gray-white ice pack beyond. Sinbad turned to climb to the crest, hoping that this precipitous peak was the last. Snow lay in the cracks and there was much ice to worry about, slippery and dangerous—but less and less of it as Sinbad scaled the rocks.

The turbaned sailor climbed to the top, crawling up over the last rock, breathless and puffing. He lay for a second, recovering his strength, and he felt something on his face.

Something warm.

Sinbad opened his eyes. What he felt was a warm wind. His eyes blinked. His face was wet. The ice that had for days encrusted his beard and eyebrows was melting.

Struggling to his feet Sinbad raced across the rounded crest of the mountain and looked down into the long, wide valley. He gasped. Blinking, he wiped his face, staring unbelievingly. Then he turned and ran back to the colder side of the hill and shouted to those below.

"Come! Hurry! Hassan, come ahead with a rope! We'll pull up the sledges from here!"

Hassan untied a rope from the stores and struggled up the hillside while the others took a break. Sinbad pulled him over the last rock and Hassan gasped.

"It's . . . it's warm!" He started toward the valley beyond, but Sinbad stopped him.

"Let's get everyone up here first," he said.

They tied the rope to an outcropping for safety, then dropped it to the sledges. With a man pushing and guiding and two strong men pulling, the first sledge was up to the crest of the mountain fairly

soon. Farah and Dione waited, resting on a rock, with Melanthius prowling around restlessly, while the second sledge was pulled up. The rope was dropped again and Maroof assisted the old Greek into the crudely rigged slings. Hauled to the top, Melanthius blinked in astonishment and staggered toward the warm side of the mountain.

Sinbad and Hassan brought up the princess, then Dione, and finally the agile Maroof, who used the rope to swarm easily up the hillside. Only then did Sinbad walk to the valley side of the hill and stand with Farah and Dione to marvel at the sights below.

A magnificent panorama was spread out below. The rocky hillside was less steep on this side, sweeping down into a broad, open plain, green and luxuriant. The mountain upon which they stood was part of a vast ring that enclosed and protected the valley. Over the distant peaks, across the fertile valley, hanging like a shimmering halo, was the extraordinary vision of the ephemeral Aurora Borealis.

"At last . . ." breathed Farah, throwing back her fur hood.

"Hyperborea," sighed Melanthius. Dione said nothing.

The sailors joined them, opening the collars of their fur clothing, which were now dripping with melted ice. They, too, stared with wonder and delight at the vision below them.

Sinbad pointed at the Aurora Borealis. "What is that strange glittering curtain of light hanging above the mountain tops? I have never seen a sight like that."

Melanthius was delighted. He slapped the scroll hidden in the fold of his crudely sewn fur coat. "Exactly as described in the scrolls. The Arimaspi called it the crown of light, the gift of the Winter Apollo." He pointed down and to their left. "There, directly under the Aurora, beyond that range of mountains . . . is the Valley of the Shrine!"

"What are we waiting for?" Hassan asked gruffly.

Sinbad grinned and motioned for them to descend. The last snowdrift lay directly below, thin but thick enough to romp in, and that is what they did.

Whooping and shouting, the members of the expedition plunged delightedly down the slope. Crying out as the sledges gained speed, they guided them deftly through the rock outcroppings. Even the aged Melanthius acted like a delighted schoolboy, kicking up snow and shouting with joy.

Sinbad swept Farah into his arms and jumped on the back of the sledge carrying the baboon in his cage. They rode the sledge down swiftly and Hassan threw a snowball after them. The sledge ran out of snow and skidded into young green grass and struck a rock. It tipped

over with amazing slowness and Sinbad carried Farah free. They fell into the grass, laughing.

In moments the rest of the party arrived, ripping off their heavy furs and falling to the ground to laugh and even cheer. Old Melanthius came down last and stood on the edge of the snow, breathing deeply and smiling.

Even the baboon, for days reduced to a chill ball of dark fur, was beginning to chitter.

"Soon, Kassim," Farah said in a whisper. "Soon!"

CHAPTER 18

The waterfall was magnificent, a high-tumbling cascade of white water that splashed off a few rocks, dividing and falling in a rush, roaring and misty. The water boiled white where it hit, then spread out into a wide pool lined with rocks and lush tropical growth before it narrowed and became once again a winding river.

The sun was shining. Everything was lush and green, with thick woods all around and a few butterflies flopping here and there. Melanthius was taking vegetation samples and writing notes in a thick parchment notebook, using a twig for a pen and ink from berries he had gathered. Sinbad was standing on the river bank, tying his cummerbund after a refreshing bath in the stream. Droplets of clear water were still beaded across his bare chest and back.

Having finished tying the long cloth at his waist, he did not put his shirt back on, but was rather enjoying the sun on his back as he rolled up and tied their fur clothing into tight bundles. One by one he stuck the furry lumps under an overturned sledge so that they would be safe and handy for the return journey.

Maroof helped him lower the sledge over the bundles, then the big black man began gathering stones and weighting down the wooden sledge so that neither predators nor weather could turn it over again. The stones would also hide it to some degree from any others that might come upon it.

Nearby, Hassan was drying strips of meat on stones in the hot sun, the flesh of a small deer they had sighted. Not far away the baboon was sitting in his cage tearing savagely at an avocado pear. His elbow struck the cage and jarred loose the door, which swung open. The baboon looked, blinked, then immediately saw the strips of drying flesh on the rocks. Tossing aside the pear, he jumped and ran right at Hassan.

The burly sailor jumped back at the growling attack, but the baboon was only after the strips of meat. He grabbed up two handfuls, jammed one fistload in his mouth, and scampered back to the cage. He slammed the door behind him and reached around to slip the latch back on. The astounded Hassan could only stare, then curse quietly and begin laying out more strips of red meat.

Carrying his shirt, Sinbad interrupted Melanthius, who had seen the

theft. “I hope it is not too late for Kassim,” he said quietly.

“He no longer responds to human speech or contact,” Melanthius said in a low, thoughtful voice.

“Except with your daughter,” Sinbad reminded the old man, who nodded slowly.

“I wonder what that means?” he said softly.

Downstream out of sight of the men, Princess Farah paused on the riverbank and looked at Dione as she came through the brush to the water. They both looked around shyly. There were waterworn rocks lining the tumbling waters. Green bushes, ferns, and reeds grew between the rocks, and there were little patches of river sand. A small waterfall spilled a spume of cold water nearby and both their eyes shone with delight.

Days of sweating under thick furs and not being able to wash had driven both women, fastidious by nature and training, to distraction. They had excused themselves and had sought a solitary spot along the rushing waters to bathe.

“The waterfall looks perfect,” Farah said. Looking around once again, they both began to undress. Modestly, they turned from each other. The smelly furs had long been discarded, but now Farah took off her fine silks and embroidered garments, and Dione her simple tunic of coarse material. They dropped their soiled clothes next to the clean clothes they ached to put on later.

Nude, they tiptoed across the warm stones and touched their feet to the water’s surface. “Oh!” Farah exclaimed, for the water was only slightly warmer than ice water, being only a short way from the snow on the slopes of the high valley.

Uttering little cries, Farah waded into the cold stream, gasping. She waded straight to the waterfall. Soon she no longer felt the icy water, and decided she was either numb or that it was not as cold as she first had thought.

Dione only waded in to her thighs, then splashed the chill water all over herself, using the slim sliver of Grecian soap they had left to wash herself. She was finished sooner than Farah, who was still under the sparkling curtain of water from the falls, and waded back to shore, where she stretched out on a flat rock to dry.

Dione began to hum a Greek folk song, her eyes closed against the sun, when she heard a scraping sound and felt the warmth of the sun being interrupted. She opened her eyes and stared straight up at the huge face of a giant primitive man, hairy and ugly. Her scream

brought Farah from the waterfall, squeezing water from her long dark hair. She stared at the sight on the riverbank—the nude, startled Dione and the looming figure of the huge man, built like an ape, who stood over her.

"Sinbad!" Farah's scream cut through the roar of the falling water.

Upstream Sinbad and his men heard the cry. "Listen," Maroof said in a hard voice. "Do you hear?"

"It's Farah!" Sinbad said. He leaped toward his sword, leaning against the upturned sledge, and bounded off into the brush with his men in close pursuit. Melanthius grabbed up an axe and hobbled after them, skirting the baboon's cage as he snarled at the old man.

Dione's fingers were edging off the warm rock onto the nearest patch of fine river sand. She gathered up a handful, her eyes staring up at the monstrous figure over her. Then, with a cry, she flung the sand into the creature's eyes. The ape-man staggered back, bellowing, momentarily blinded, and clutching at his face.

Dione scrambled to her feet, snatched at her clothes, and ran toward the river bank just as Farah stepped, naked and glistening wetly, onto the bank.

"Run, Princess!"

Farah snatched her sari from the rock and wrapped the garment around her as the two women ran madly toward the camp.

Sinbad came from around a rock and almost collided with the two nearly naked women. Dione tossed her homespun tunic over her head as Farah blurted out a warning.

"It's hideous! And it's right back there!"

Hassan and Maroof leaped into the space by the women, their swords at the ready. Sinbad shoved the women behind the men and started forward. "I'll try to divert him!"

Hassan and the black seaman stood before the women, their swords extended, their eyes on the advancing ape creature. Sinbad stepped toward the monster, who stopped.

Roaring, the grayish-furred monster ripped a dead tree out by the roots to use as a club. Not giving it time to get set, Sinbad suddenly leaped at the ape thing, shouting loudly and waving his sword. The great manlike ape roared again and swung the tree club. Sinbad ducked and was about to try to tempt the creature into another wild swing so that he might try to get in under the blow and put a sword into his armpit, when Melanthius broke through the brush.

"Sinbad, no!" the old man said breathlessly. "He . . ." The Greek sucked in air, then cried out again, "Stand still! All of you!"

Farah tugged at her sari to better cover her body, but her eyes were on the monstrous creature that had found them. Melanthius stepped around them and advanced upon the gray behemoth.

"Sir . . ." said Hassan, warningly, but the philosopher just waved down his objections.

"Don't make any sudden moves," Melanthius warned in a quiet voice. "He is as frightened of us as we are of him . . ."

Hassan and Maroof exchanged dubious looks. "I am *more* frightened," Hassan said.

Maroof gave him a twisted smile. "I am *twice* more frightened!"

"Sinbad," the alchemist said softly. "Lower your sword and step back . . . slowly!"

Sinbad complied, watching the creature, whose deep-set beady eyes shifted from human to human suspiciously. He snorted and made a short aimless move with the broken tree trunk. The creature took a step forward, but did not advance further.

"What sort of evil monster is it?" Sinbad asked the Greek scientist softly.

"It is not a monster," the old man replied, coming forward slowly. "He is one of man's ancestors . . . and they are not evil." He took another step and stopped abreast of Sinbad. "They are called troglodytes . . . I have a skull from one in my laboratory."

The creature moved and Farah burst out with a cry. "He is coming closer!"

The troglodyte shuffled forward slowly, suspiciously, grunting and growling. He made menacing gestures with his shattered tree trunk as he started to circle the group. He seemed uncertain whether to attack or not.

"Dione," Melanthius said quietly, "speak to it . . . gently. They have no idea of language . . . but these primates were known for their gentleness with the female of the species . . . or so some believe."

Dione stepped cautiously forward, her eyes big with careful calculation . . . and some fear. But her experiences with the primitive people of Casgar had given her some guidelines.

"There, there . . ." she said softly. "No harm . . . we mean no harm." She slowly raised her hand toward him in a gesture of friendship, showing her palm, open so that there could be no concealed weapon. She took a step closer, her eyes slitting now in concentration as she attempted to break through to the beastlike creature with her *telepatheia.*

"Friends . . . we are friends."

Not to be outdone, Farah, too, stepped toward the troglodyte. “Yes . . . friends . . . friends.” The creature snorted and Farah said urgently, “Dione . . . careful!”

But the blonde daughter of the fabled magician of Casgar took still a closer step, holding out her arms. The creature lowered his tree club and moved toward her in a shuffle They were only a few feet apart when the air was rent by a high-pitched screech. The troglodyte growled as they all turned, startled, toward the sound.

The baboon, free of its cage, was leaping from rock to rock, then crashed through some brush, screeching wildly, racing forward to “protect” his female. The ferocity of the vocal attack caused the ape-thing to rise to its full height, roaring angrily, backing away from Dione with swinging arms and repeated thuds of his tree trunk on the moist soil of the river’s edge.

Sinbad made a sudden move toward Farah but she stopped him with a gesture. “My brother was always very jealous!” she said with a knowing smile.

But the baboon went to Dione, who knelt next to it. She looked up at the troglodyte. “He means no harm,” she said, and repeated herself several times.

“Perhaps,” Melanthius muttered, coming forward. “Perhaps Kassim can communicate with him for us.” The old man also knelt by the dark-furred baboon. “Kassim . . . Kassim! Tell the troglodyte to put down his weapon . . . we will drop ours . . .” The old man looked back at Sinbad, who glowered, then dropped his sword. Reluctantly Hassan and Maroof followed his example. But none of them dropped their weapons very far away.

Dione got close to the baboon. “Kassim . . . please, Kassim . . . you understood my father . . . please try.”

The baboon looked at her, then twisted his head to look at the others. He took her hand, then turned back to the troglodyte. He began to make gestures with his free hand and to gibber in high-pitched monkey grunts. The troglodyte’s small eyes went from baboon to the humans beyond, then back to the long-haired blonde. After a moment of listening to the baboon’s chittering, he lowered his tree trunk, then dropped it. It rolled and crashed into the brush, and then there was silence, except for the murmuring stream.

Sinbad blew out some air and looked at Hassan and Maroof with relief. Melanthius broke into a wide smile of discovery. “They *can* communicate!” The ancient Greek turned toward Sinbad and his men, his face wreathed in smiles. “He knows now we do not wish to harm him . . . who knows? Perhaps he may be able to help us!” He turned

back to gesture at the women. “Dione! Princess! Persuade Kassim to bring Trog over here.” He gestured toward a clear patch of sand and started walking there. “I want to show him something.”

As the baboon began once again to chitter at the man thing, the bearded alchemist beamed at Sinbad. “A troglodyte. I thought they might be legendary after all, despite the skull I have. A few bones have been found, mostly in caves, and thought to be animals by most. Or Titans—the gods that lived before the Olympians.” He shrugged, his gaze returning to the hairy creature the baboon was leading over in a shambling walk. “But no one knew for certain. He probably lives in a cave. No idea of language, really, no concept of even the rudiments of civilization.” He studied the creature a moment more.

“They live from day to day. No agriculture, no religion, probably, except perhaps worshipping the forces of nature—the wind, water, the sun, fire, perhaps.” He shook his head. “God’s attempt at a man . . . a failure, an experiment gone wrong.”

“Can you be certain of that?” Farah asked. “Perhaps he is some sort of cousin . . . or . . . and I shudder at the thought . . . some kind of ancestor?”

“I don’t know,” Melanthius said, “but I am most curious.”

“What are we going to do with him?” Sinbad asked.

Hassan laughed. *“Now* we think of that!”

“He might be useful,” the old Greek said thoughtfully. “He is, after all, a native here.” The old man’s eyes lit up. “Look, look! They seem to understand each other. Kassim is talking to him, to Trog!”

“Who?” Hassan asked.

“Trog,” Farah said.

“As good a name as any,” Sinbad shrugged.

Melanthius was moving closer, despite a cautionary word from Sinbad. But the sailor could see the old man was determined to try and make himself understood. As he seemed to be moving with caution Sinbad did not interfere.

The baboon brought the great gray creature to the sand patch, and Melanthius came close to it. The baboon hopped to a new position as the old Greek began speaking, carefully enunciating each word with slow emphasis.

“We are all your friends . . . we friends to you, Trog,” he said, pointing at himself and gesturing toward the sailors, then pointing at the man thing. “Friends, Trog . . . friends.”

Trog grunted and blinked. His eyes were wary, but neither his expression nor his actions were hostile.

"You understand?" Melanthius asked carefully. "You nod head, like this," the old man said bobbing his head. "This means *yes* . . . shake head . . . like this . . . means *no*. Nod. Shake. Shake. Nod. Trog understand?"

Trog imitated both the shake and the nod, then started grunting again in his deep, rumbling voice. Melanthius sighed and looked around at the others.

"Somewhat a lengthy and uphill task, I fear . . ."

Trog continued to nod and shake his huge, heavy-browed head. Then without warning the baboon began to grunt, as if in answer. Trog turned ponderously to look down at the baboon.

Sinbad was suddenly struck with just how massive this creature was. He was as tall as even Sinbad, the tallest, could reach. His arms were as massive as a man's thighs. The creature bent down until he was almost nose to nose with the grunting baboon.

The primitive man, enormous and incredibly strong, sniffed at the baboon and the baboon sniffed back, between chitterings and gibberings. Then they started into an animated conversation, completely oblivious to the others, a curious conversation that was mostly grunts of various kinds, but also included waves of the hands, the rubbery use of lips, and the protruding of tongues, the blink of eyes, and endless variations on whistles, hoots, moans, and more grunts.

Sinbad and his men exchanged puzzled looks as they observed the incomprehensible conversation. Maroof and Hassan sat down on a rock, as Melanthius squatted on the sand and began drawing something with a twig. Farah bent to speak to the baboon.

"Kassim . . . Kassim . . ." The baboon continued his grunting talk with the now silent Trog, who was eyeing Farah curiously. She looked back at Sinbad with apprehension on her face. "He's getting harder to get through to," she said plaintively.

"Try," he said.

"Yes, of course." She turned back to the baboon. "Kassim . . . *Kassim* . . ." The baboon ignored her, intent on his conversation.

"Kassim!" Melanthius said sharply. He pointed to the sand. The baboon ceased his chatter and looked down at the sand. He gibbered at the troglodyte, who also looked down, a curiously innocent expression on his heavy features.

On the sand Melanthius had drawn a strange, grotesque face in the sand, a gorgonlike face with a huge gaping mouth. Sinbad craned his neck to look, then asked the Greek philosopher, "What will that mean

to Trog? Or to anyone?" He stopped, recognizing the drawing. "It's the face drawn in the scrolls."

"The face that marks the entrance to the Valley, the Gate to the Shrine . . ."

The huge hulking figure just stared at the scratching in the sand and Sinbad made a noise of disgust. "It means nothing to him . . ."

The baboon peered at the drawing, then started gibbering and grunting up at the huge beast-man. Slowly, very slowly, Trog nodded his head. The baboon chittered and jumped up and down and the caveman still nodded.

Melanthius stepped forward to ask a vital question. "Where?" He peered up at the impassive face of the troglodyte. "Where?"

The baboon made more grunts and then Trog slowly raised his immense arm and pointed. Sinbad, good sailor that he was, noted the direction, compared it with the position of the sun and estimated the time of day.

Melanthius was delighted, and he took the other hand of the great beast-man and said, "Excellent, my good fellow! Excellent!"

Sinbad studied the drawing in the sand, then his booted foot went out and he obliterated the drawing, smoothing the sand until there was nothing but boot marks.

Zenobia's clawed foot scratched on the polished metal deck of the sleek bronze boat. She held on to the shrouds tightly, for her balance was not too good and the ship rocked steadily from the crash of ice into the water. All around them icebergs were shedding weakened chunks, splitting and forming new icebergs. Ahead of them was the immense wall of the ice pack itself, constantly shedding grotesquely large blocks of ice, which usually flipped over to hide most of their great bulk underwater. Rock-hard splinters of ice broke away and fell, splashing loudly into the chill sea. Cracks like explosions split away more and more chunks, some small, some as large as temples or small hills.

The bronze ship rocked steadily from the waves set up all around them by the icebergs as they shed unstable sections, and from ahead, the birthplace of the great frozen mountains.

Rafi ran up the ladder, his feet clanging on the metal rungs, crying out to his mother. "Look, there! There!" He pointed ahead at what she had already seen—the cave opening.

Rafi braced himself on the poop deck by his mother and looked breathlessly ahead. The cave entrance was like a shark's mouth,

triangular, toothed with great spears of ice hanging down. He glanced down at the Minaton, who was still steadily rowing, his bronze arms moving rhythmically.

"Make for the cave!" Zenobia ordered. "But slowly!"

The bronze ship slowed. Great hunks of ice continued to fall from the face of the ice pack that capped the world, crushing into previous ice flows, breaking them and tilting up huge slabs. The water was almost white with the activity, and the noise, sharp edged and shrill in the chilled air, was loud and dangerous-sounding.

Zenobia's teeth gleamed in a triumphant smile. "At last! The entrance to the Tunnel of Ice. The way to Hyperborea!"

Rafi gulped. "We are going in . . . ?"

Zenobia nodded, her eyes hot upon the blue-white ice wall, "Minaton!" she cried. "Cease!" She studied the entrance carefully. "It was too narrow for Sinbad's ship! He did not pass this way! Now we shall be there before them!" She cried out to the bronze creature below. "The tunnel, Minaton! The tunnel!" She pointed with her arm out stiffly, aiming at the mouth of the tunnel. Then she shivered and clutched her tiger and panther fur coat around her tightly. Her bronze boat moved toward the cave opening, the Minaton directing the gleaming ship toward the hole. Rafi looked nervous, and his eyes were watching the higher reaches of the ice pack. The closer they got, the bigger they realized the wall of ancient ice was. He bit at his lip and turned his rings nervously as the chunks of ice broke away to the left and right, falling into the sea with loud, shattering noises.

A chunk fell from the top and crashed into the sea just ahead of them, falling across the cave mouth. Rafi twitched, but his mother never moved. They approached the cave mouth far too swiftly for Rafi's nerves and before he could formulate a line of argument for not going in, they were.

A splash behind them caused Rafi to turn, a curse upon his lips. A chunk of ice as large as the ship had fallen just behind them, the wave tipping the vessel forward, thrusting it deeper and more swiftly into the cave.

"Get a torch, Rafi," Zenobia ordered.

"Yes, Mother," he said nervously, and ran down the brass ladder to light and mount a torch in the prow. All around him were the sloping walls of ice, wet and glistening, with huge stalactites that dripped water down upon them. He lit a second torch and carried it back to the poop deck to mount it in a bracket. Then he shivered. His furs were proof against most of the cold, but his shivers came from fear, not the weather.

The ice tunnel was big—big enough for the mast of the bronze ship, but still Rafi felt trapped, enclosed . . . caught.

The Aurora Borealis was a glittering, shimmering, ethereal curtain that hung in the sky mysteriously. Hassan grunted into Sinbad's ear as they climbed the hill toward the mountains that Melanthius had said were the ones that concealed the Valley of Hyperborea.

"Beautiful . . . but cold, too, huh, Captain?"

"Aye, Hassan. Beautiful . . . but you have to come so far north to see them that you are in dangerous territory."

Everyone paused to get a good look at the awesome sight, even Trog, who was carrying the baboon. One of the sailors started walking again and as he passed the massive troglodyte he muttered to his companion, "Where was he when we were lugging those sledges, hey?"

The prow of Zenobia's ship was a cluster of flaming torches. Rafi pulled out a burnt-out one and threw it into the water below, where it sizzled. Then he lit a new one in the flames of the others and jammed it into the bracket. Then he scampered down and back to where his mother stood. He felt much safer close to her. Their eyes probed the darkness ahead, down the sloping walls of the ice tunnel, past the light of the torches, searching for the way, hoping to avoid any ice falls or traps.

"I see no evidence of passage by Sinbad's ship," Rafi said.

Zenobia gave her son a quick look. "Ships seldom leave tracks upon the waters, my son." Rafi flushed and was silent.

Suddenly the torchlight revealed a startling sight and Zenobia's command to the Minaton echoed in the icy vaults. "Minaton! Ease your labor!"

The ship still drifted, but the torches were enough light for them to see an extraordinary sight. Within the walls of ice on both sides were ghostly shapes, frozen in a tomb of eternal ice. Rafi gasped at the numbers revealed by the blazing torches. They seemed to stretch on and on, a long enormous catacomb.

Zenobia grasped the railing with hands almost as clawed as her clawed foot. The frozen bodies of strange humans formed a bizarre and terrifying mural along both sides of the winding tunnel. Some of the bodies seem perfectly preserved, with odd clothing and weapons. Others were petrified, withered and ancient beyond belief, with all fabric rotted away. Still others were formless and disturbingly

hideous, and some were little more than arrangements of skulls and bones.

“The last of the Arimaspi?” Rafi whispered, his voice quavering with fear.

“Who can say?” Zenobia said, her eyes drinking in the sight.

Rafi gulped. The place frightened him more than anything except the thought of losing his mother. “Let us go back,” he said to his mother in a rasping whisper. “We shouldn’t be here . . .”

“No,” she said firmly, her eyes darting from shrouded figure to mummified corpse.

Rafi’s chin trembled and he closed his eyes against the sight. The contents of the frozen catacomb shook him and again he pleaded with his magician mother to go back.

“No,” she said without looking at him. “Even if we *wanted* to we couldn’t.” She gestured at the walls around them. “There isn’t room to turn.”

“Please . . . this place . . .”

"No, Rafi.” Her eyes came around to glare at him and he ducked his face away. “Would you deny your mother a chance at changing *this?”* She thrust out her clawed foot and he felt like retching.

“No, no . .”

They drifted in silence, but Rafi noticed something. “Mother . . .” She ignored him, but he persisted, the fear that something was going badly wrong driving him on. “Mother . . .”

She looked at him with exaggerated annoyance. Rafi pointed at the Minaton, then at the water. “The Minaton is not rowing . . . but the boat is still moving . . .”

Zenobia took an immediate interest. “Yes . . . yes . . . there is an extraordinary force pulling us like a mighty magnet . . .” Her lips pulled back in a grimace. “Drawing us to the Shrine!” She laughed, a strangled crackle that echoed against the ice walls. “Pulling us like a mighty, invisible chain . . . drawing us north!”

Her laugh thundered in the tunnel of translucent ice and Rafi gulped, staring into the darkness ahead. The torches were still revealing shadowy figure after shadowy shape encased in the ice. He shivered again, then again, but not from the cold.

“Haunted . . .” he whispered to himself.

CHAPTER 19

Sinbad and his companions moved faster now, their excitement and urgency matching the giant strides of the hairy Trog, who led them now, straight at the looming mountains across the green valley they had first entered.

"Six wives?" Hassan asked Maroof.

The black sailor shrugged. "Mohammed had six once. You remember him? Thin, exhausted, worn-out fellow?"

"Aye. But then he let his harem run him, instead of he running them. *I* wouldn't let that happen," grunted the sailor smugly.

"Uh-huh. But six *lovely* wives . . . each more beautiful than the other? And nothing to hinder you? Tell me you wouldn't try to satisfy them all!"

Hassan grunted again. "Aye, at first. To sample them all, of course. But later on, no. I'd run things at *my* pace. You'll see."

The black Maroof laughed at him. "Aye, and after you've given these beauties a good taste of it, *then* you'll change things around?" The sailor laughed heartily and slapped his companion on his back. "Sure you will, old friend, sure you will."

"I won't end up like Mohammed, worn out before his time, with that haunted look."

"Perhaps," conceded the black sailor. "But you might consider less than six, of course."

"Less than six?" The burly Hassan seemed outraged by the suggestion. "But we were promised . . . !"

Laughing, Maroof shoved at him. "Each chooses his own death, and there are worse ways to go, eh?"

"Five at the *least* . . ."

"Well, consider this. One, of course, to cook and sew and fetch and carry. Then another for variety, and to keep the first one company while you are drinking in the tavern." Hassan nodded in agreement. "Then a third, so that two cannot make a truce and conspire against you."

"And a fourth?"

Maroof nodded. "So that they will form two friendships and never

be able to get a majority to act against you."

"But I would own them! They must do as I say!" protested Hassan angrily.

The other seafaring man nodded wisely. "Of course . . . except that no man ever truly owned a woman. You can own a camel, you can own a ship, you can own a sword . . . but not a woman. Give them enough time and they will own you, no matter how much you should pay for them."

"That is another thing," Hassan said morosely. "How much should I pay for a wife?"

Maroof shrugged expressively as they climbed. "Whatever you do, it will not be right. If you pay more for one than another, that one will lord it over the other. The cheaper wife will shirk her duties and sulk."

"Perhaps I should buy six . . . or four . . . at the same time and price?"

"If you could, but that is buying quantity, not quality. You must think of quality first," he said. "One *good* wife is worth several bad ones, regardless of the purchase price." He looked shrewdly at his younger companion. "Never buy a wife when you are lustful. Slake your lust and *then* go buying."

"That seems . . . but she must *make* me lustful, just to look at her!" A leer crossed Hassan's face.

Maroof bobbed his head. "Aye, but only when your loins are not full. You must think of other things than the pleasures of the bed, my friend. That is important, true, but it is not all. You might even consider an ugly woman."

"An ugly wo—!" Hassan was shocked.

"Aye, for she will be eternally grateful. Make her your first wife and she will keep the others in line."

Hassan grinned wolfishly. "Good advice . . . I shall start with four, an ugly one that can cook superbly . . . then three beauties . . . *then* I shall consider the purchase of one or two more, as I might come across them. For spice and variety, of course."

"Of course," sighed the black Maroof. "Variety is the greatest aphrodisiac of all."

"Aphrodisiacs?" Hassan asked quickly. "With six wives . . . well, four to start . . . one might have need of such . . . um . . . aids." He looked sideways at his friend. "What do you know of such things?"

"What I said is still the best advice. Variety." He sighed, seeing his friend's curious countenance. "There is Aquileus, found in eagle's nest. It is purple in color and comes from Persia. The Egyptians, now, they

are much more elaborate about it. They hold with several baths a day —"

"Ugh," Hassan grunted in disgust. "A *day?"*

The other man nodded. "The dress of the women is diaphanous, for they hold that the subtly veiled body will arouse the erotic impulse more than the totally unclothed one."

The burly Hassan thought a moment. "That is often true, yes," he said. "Please go on."

"They use dipilatories to remove the hair, and much perfume. As you know, they use more cosmetics than most. They use plant juices to make the eyes glow, and of course, as many ornaments as possible to increase the visual attention and the sensual inclinations."

"I've heard that those red fruit . . . tomatoes?—are useful."

"Aye, and thyme, herring fish, curry from the Indies, even apples. I've heard Roman matrons speak highly of trout, and they said that Venus was fond of salt."

"Truffles, laurel leaves, and the cardoon—I've heard those mentioned. The Hebrews speak well of the caper berry in their writings, I've been told, and, of course, the Arabs speak highly of carrots."

Maroof laughed loudly. "Anything, anything at all, when you come right down to it!" He slapped his friend on the back. "What I said earlier is *still* best. With four wives you'd have that variety."

"And better still with six," he leered.

"Come on, you two," Sinbad called down to them. "You are falling behind!"

"But we speak of important subjects!" Hassan shouted back. "Do you favor four or six wives, Sinbad?"

"I'll count none until this is over," their captain retorted. "Now catch up!"

The two sailors began to climb. "Six," muttered Hassan.

"Four to start," replied Maroof, under his breath. "See first if you are man enough for four."

The last of the mummified corpses was behind them. The ice walls of the tunnel had given way to jagged rock. The sides of the tunnel narrowed and widened erratically, and sometimes the metal tip of Zenobia's mast scraped along over the raw stone. Other times they drifted with still waters on either side, the torchlight barely illuminating the rock walls.

It got warmer. Zenobia let her coat of tiger and panther skins slip from her shoulders and left it lying on the glistening metal desk. She squinted through the smoke from the torches, staring ahead with a fierce concentration that shut her son out completely.

Rafi's face was running with sweat, both from the increasing heat and from increasing fear. He kept looking behind him, turning around suddenly, eyes wide, as if he expected the ghostly bodies of the ice-buried dead to be after them.

But his eyes were also on what was ahead, on the next turning of the raw tunnel of rock or upon the next lagoonlike underground lake. Each moment, each drifting second brought them closer to . . . to something. Rafi was not certain what, but he didn't think he would like it. If it hadn't been for the hideous clawed foot of his mother, a constant reminder that they must be successful, he would have been on his knees, begging her to order the Minaton to turn back at the next widening of the tunnel.

But the scraping of the sharp claws on the metal deck kept him from speaking. His mother *had* to regain her foot. And Rafi did not care who had to die for that to come to pass.

They started to descend into a narrow gorge when Trog stopped and pointed ahead with a ponderous arm. Ahead and down was the Gate to the Lost Valley of Hyperborea. The old man breathed the name aloud and the sailors stirred restlessly.

The gorge deepened ahead, falling steeply down through a protecting ring of cliffs, rocky and forbidding. Across the gorge, like a colossal dam, was the Gate, an immense masonry wall of monumental stones, framing a grotesque, gorgonlike face carved out of solid rock. The Gate itself was the mouth of this fantastic creature.

"Well, come on," Sinbad said, and led the way. His men followed, then Farah and Dione and her father, with the great Trog plodding along behind now that he had led them to the formidable Gate.

They scrambled over the rocks down to the floor of the narrow canyon, then paused briefly to look at the gigantic wonder before them. Frowning, Maroof pointed up at the surrounding cliffs. "Are those caves?"

"Aye," Sinbad muttered absently, his attention upon the grotesque Gate face. But behind him Trog had come down and stood looking around. The baboon jumped down from his arms, where he had been riding, and peered around curiously. Then, as Trog began to walk away, the baboon began a loud cluttering, jumping and waving to the humans.

Sinbad looked around and stopped. From the caves came one, then two, then several of the huge troglodytes like Trog. From caves high and low several of the massive, hairy creatures peered down, or ambled slowly out toward the expedition.

“By the gods!” muttered Hassan. “More of them!”

“Hold!” Sinbad said as he heard swords slither from their scabbards. “Watch Trog.”

The great beast-man was walking slowly toward the others like himself. More creatures stuck their heads over high ledges, but no one appeared hostile, only wary and watchful.

Trog joined two of the great hairy men, and they grunted and gestured at each other. The baboon trotted over, but stayed at a safe distance, his head tilted in a watchful look, his ugly face alert.

The inhabitants of the caves listened, but seemed dubious, as Trog grunted at them. Their deep-set eyes flickered over the smaller humans and Sinbad thought they were becoming more nervous, if not actually frightened. But Trog continued to talk and their nervousness seemed to lessen. Melanthius edged closer, his face in rapt attention to their grunts and squeals, and Sinbad followed to be of help if needed.

But whenever Trog looked at the Gate he seemed afraid. Farah joined Sinbad and she noticed it at once. “Trog seems afraid of the Gate . . .”

Melanthius nodded. “Afraid of what lies beyond, perhaps . . .”

The baboon was trying to coax Trog back to the group, which was drifting toward the Gate, but was having little success. Sinbad scratched his chin. “Why should he be afraid?”

“Like all primitives,” Melanthius said, “he is afraid of the unknown, afraid of anything he cannot understand . . .”

At last the baboon got Trog moving toward the gate. The baboon trotted along with him, his shorter legs making many more steps than the troglodyte’s great tree-trunk limbs. Sinbad watched the giant troglodytes drift back into their caves.

The party of explorers went up the steps to the massive Gate. The huge face in the Gate had two eyes that seemed to glare at them. Melanthius bent to examine the lock and Sinbad joined him. The sea captain gave a sigh of resignation.

“No use,” he said, pointing at the great sliding metal lock. “We will never be able to move the bar without blocks and ropes . . . which we do not have!”

Dione looked over his shoulder, then turned toward Trog. “Trog will help. He must help. Kassim!” she called. “Make your friend help us!

We must open the Gate!"

Trog hesitated and the baboon chittered at him. Reluctantly, the giant man thing lumbered up the steps. He took the lock in his hands and shook it, and the baboon made more gibberings. Then the huge hands of the troglodyte gripped the sliding bar and began to pull. Muscles bulged and rippled beneath his hairy hide and he made a surprisingly high-pitched grunt.

Then, with a rusty, ripping, grating sound, the locking bar moved. It slammed back the last few inches with a booming sound and Sinbad and his men cheered. Dione went to the hairy Trog and patted his arm, looking up at him with a wide smile.

Sinbad gestured and everyone put their weight against the great doors. "Ugh!" Hassan exploded with effort. "They're locked from the other side as well!"

"No, push harder," Melanthius said. "They haven't been opened in years . . . perhaps centuries!"

They tried again. The doors squeaked slightly but they were getting nowhere when Trog leaned forward and added his pressure to the right-hand door. With a crunching snap it began to open. Heads down, the men put their might into the door and shoved it open the length of an arm, then stopped to blow their breath out.

"Look . . ." Farah said, pointing through.

The gorge wound away into the distance, dropping and twisting. Ahead, some miles off, was a snowcapped range of mountains which formed a valley. Even at that distance they could see the enormous pyramid in the center of the valley. Over the pyramid was a magnificent display of the Aurora Borealis.

"Look!" Farah said, pointing. "The pyramid is tipped with a metal cone!"

Melanthius was almost in a state of trance as he gazed at the sight before him. Almost in a whisper he said, "The Shrine . . . the Shrine of the Four Elements!"

Sinbad broke the spell by starting forward. He went a few feet and called over his shoulder, "All right—this is what we came for, isn't it? Let's go!"

The sailors started down the gorge. One helped Farah and another assisted the old Greek. Farah looked around, suddenly fearful. "Wait! Where's Kassim?"

She looked back. The baboon was by the Gate, watching them descend. Trog stood over him as the baboon hopped around the beast-man's thick leg with excitement.

“Kassim!” Farah called.

The baboon grabbed Trog’s thick finger and tugged. Reluctantly Trog leaned down and picked up his anthropoid friend and started down after Sinbad and the others. Two of the giant beast-men moved out of the shadows and stood in the open Gate watching the others descend.

After a few moments the two huge figures turned and began closing the heavy gate. It shut with a booming clang and then the rustling sound of putting the great log in place was heard.

The Gate was closed. And locked. And guarded.

CHAPTER 20

The metal ship slid silently through the rock tunnel. The bronze Minaton was motionless. Rafi and his mother saw that the jagged tunnel walls of raw rock had given way to roughly hewn but still recognizable stonework.

The tunnel went on, the only noise the fizzle of the torches and the lap of water against the brass hull. Then Zenobia pointed ahead with a trembling finger. “Look, Rafi!”

The torchlight revealed a darkness on the side of the rock wall, and as they glided closer Zenobia saw that it was a dry, side tunnel. The framing of the tunnel mouth was decorated in strange figures hewn in the rock.

“Stop us here,” Zenobia ordered as she pulled out her copy of Melanthius’s chart. Rafi caught at the edge of the tunnel and the ship came slowly to a stop, bobbing slightly.

“Yes,” Zenobia said softly. “Yes.” She traced a line on the map, then spoke sharply to Rafi. “Put a plank across. We will *all* go!”

Rafi tied off the ship to one of the roughly hewn figures, then found a metal plank and put it from railing to quay. He held it steady as his mother climbed up and crossed over. Then he, himself, jumped up and raced across, carrying several torches, afraid to look down into the black waters.

“Come, Minaton!” Zenobia ordered, and the bronze giant climbed ponderously up, carrying a long, pointed iron bar and a dark, round metal cauldron with a sealed top.

The metal plank bent dangerously under the weight of the Minaton, but soon they were assembled in the tunnel mouth. Zenobia consulted her chart copy again, then gestured for them to proceed.

Rafi stuck the unlit torches under his arm and held aloft a lighted one, and they started down the stone-lined tunnel. Minaton moved stiffly behind them, his bull head almost brushing the roof of the tunnel.

They walked through the darkness in their pool of torchlight, their footsteps lost in the noise made by the Minaton’s metal feet scraping over the stones. Rafi shivered again, but he was still sweating.

Suddenly his head came up and he stopped. His mother urged him

forward, and the light from the torch fell upon the things that had stopped him. The stone tunnel divided. There were two triangular-shaped arches, thick and solid. Through one they could see stone steps that led upward to what appeared to be daylight. The other had steps that led down into Stygian darkness and an unknown fate.

"Daylight!" Rafi said happily. "The sun!"

Zenobia frowned and pointed at the darkened arch. "But this must be our way." She shoved at Rafi. "Go and see."

He looked around at her with wide, frightened eyes. "Down into the dark?"

Exasperated with his fears, Zenobia slapped him. The sound of the slap echoed in the cavern. *"Go!"* she commanded. Reluctantly Rafi obeyed, cringing under his mother's wrath. He moved toward the arch, then looked back at her with a pleading expression. But she was right behind him and only shoved him on.

Rafi went through the arch and stopped, holding his torch high. He took another torch, lit it, and handed it to his mother. Then, reluctantly and fearfully, he started to descend. The steps turned and as soon as he was out of sight of his mother he saw a stone door, carved with a grotesque face that seemed familar to him. With a start Rafi recognized it as the face drawn on the chart his mother had copied. He bent and lowered the torch, for in the mouth of the weird face were carved various symbols. Four he recognized immediately as alchemical symbols for Earth, Fire, Air, and Water—the Four Elements which everyone believed composed everything. And there was a pyramidal shape, a delta triangle, also carved.

"What is it?" Zenobia called down to him.

"Only a closed door," Rafi answered. "And a strange face carved on it. No sign of a bolt or a lock." Rafi moved back up the stone staircase and looked up at his mother questioningly.

"But this *must* be the underground entrance to the Shrine," she protested.

Rafi shrugged. "There is no other way through. The steps stop at the door . . ."

Zenobia motioned for him to come up. "Then try the other archway." She shrugged. "The stairs that lead up to the sunlight."

She looked at her chart again and Rafi came gratefully trotting up the steps. She continued to study the chart, with the Minaton waiting patiently nearby, while Rafi went through the other arch and up into the sunlight.

He emerged, blinking and squinting, into the bright sunlight. Then

he turned and ran down a few steps to shout to his mother. “Come! You must see this! It’s . . . it’s . . . Come, Mother!”

She came up the steps, rolling the chart into its original roll and tucking it away. She, too, blinked at the unaccustomed sunlight, and looked around her.

The steps she ascended came out into the remains of an Egyptian temple, or at least a temple in a style heavily influenced by the structures along the Nile. It was in ruins, its stones tumbled and cracked, with grass and vines climbing over the ruins.

But Zenobia’s eyes gleamed, for a half-mile away was the great pyramid, its metallic cone shining brightly in the warm sun. The witch-woman stepped forward eagerly, dragging her awkward clawed foot, wending her way past the chipped remains of fallen columns and sand drifts. She paused and looked around in wonder. Behind them the tropical valley extended to hills, then mountains capped with Arctic snow.

The Minaton came up the stone steps, his feet scraping on the hewn blocks, and he emerged, glistening and golden, into the sunlight.

“Come, Minaton!” Zenobia cried, and they started through the rubble of the ruined temple toward the great pyramid. The cauldron carried by the Minaton was leaking a few wisps of smoke.

“The Shrine . . .” Zenobia whispered fiercely. Her clawed foot caught on a root and she yanked it free savagely.

They had almost run down from the hills, but now that Sinbad’s party was almost to the great pyramid they slowed, without command, and took their time. The baboon clung to Trog’s thick neck, getting a higher view than anyone. Melanthius bobbled along next to Sinbad, muttering and not answering questions. Sinbad had to watch him, for he didn’t look where he was going most of the time, his eyes being on the huge structure ahead. Farah moved along easily and gracefully, with the four sailors bringing up the rear, happy and jesting, enjoying the warmth of the Valley and making wild speculations about what the pyramid was all about.

Everyone grew more and more silent as they got to the base of the monumental structure. The gigantic stones which made up the pyramid were as tall as a man, and they climbed up, dwindling toward the bright metal cap.

And above it all, directly overhead, was the shimmering glory of the Aurora Borealis.

On another side of the great pile of stone Zenobia and her son arrived at the base. They had been looking for an entrance all the way across the valley, but had seen none. Impatiently, Zenobia ordered Rafi to search along the side facing them, while she and the hulking Minaton searched the next nearest side.

"Come to me whether you find anything or not," she ordered, and Rafi was off. Zenobia limped along the base, looking for any sort of sign of a hidden entry as well as a more public one. After a few minutes Rafi came running back, panting and sweating.

"N-nothing," he gasped, leaning against the lowest tier of blocks. "I could not find an entrance."

"There must be one," she snapped. She pinned him with her slanted eyes. "You looked for secret entrances, didn't you?" He nodded, miserable under her scrutiny. "You looked for paths that ended against the stone? Carved figures? *Anything* at all?"

Rafi shook his head, wiping the sweat from his brow. "There was nothing, I swear it."

"Agh!" Zenobia turned away in disgust. "There *must* be an entrance!" she snarled. "Come on, my useless son, we will look at the other two sides!"

They moved along for a distance until Zenobia stopped suddenly. Her sharp eyes had seen a small sign carved into a block of stone. She recognized it at once as a symbol she had seen on one of Melanthius's charts. She moved closer, glaring at the sign, as if by willpower she could make it speak.

She turned away with a sweep of her gown and signaled to the Minaton. "Here! We must make an entrance, *here!"*

Zenobia backed away and the Minaton moved forward to the great block of stone upon which was carved the small Hyperborean symbol. He set the cauldron at the base of the wall, under the inscribed mark. Then he stepped back, holding his iron bar.

Zenobia held the phial in her outstretched palm and began to chant. "Spirits of the Underworld—infuse this potion with your powers! Efreets! Jinns! El Marid, I call on you—"

The cauldron started to emit more whiffs of smoke and Rafi gagged as he caught some of them. The cauldron began to quiver . . . to pulsate . . .

Sinbad looked at Melanthius as they surveyed the awesome size of the pyramid. "At last you'll have a use for that precious 'key' of yours." He gestured from side to side, indicating the great size of the structure

before them. “If you can find a lock in which to fit it!”

Melanthius nodded, his face grave. “We’ll find it. The scrolls haven’t been wrong yet.” He looked to the right, then the left, shading his eyes. “We must look for an entrance. Somewhere there among the rocks, perhaps. It will lead directly to the pyramid through an underground series of sealed doors—”

There was a sudden, terrifying explosion—a thunderclap of noise—and Sinbad drew his sword. Wordlessly, he gestured with the naked blade. There was a white cloud of smoke over the pyramid, boiling up from a side they could not see.

“What was it?” Farah asked nervously.

“It was like an earthquake,” Dione said.

“There can be only one possible answer,” Melanthius said ominously.

“The witch!” cried Sinbad. “Zenobia!”

There was another, fainter rumble and the sailors took better grips on their drawn weapons. “She’s here ahead of us,” Sinbad said.

The sunlight flashed off Minaton’s polished surface as he wielded the long harpoonlike metal bar, levering out the huge blocks from the side of the immense Shrine. The explosion of the cauldron had created a gaping hole as high as a man, but it was obvious that the pyramid was not just a block of stone deep, but amazingly massive.

Zenobia and Rafi watched the monstrous creation heaving on the bar, and the witch-woman’s eyes glared and flashed as she willed the bronze giant on to greater effort.

A block fractured by the explosion split under the pressure from the Minaton, and half of it tumbled out of the raw wound in the side of the ancient Shrine. The bronze Minaton rested the bar against a block and bent to pick up the remaining half-block and toss it out where it crashed into the other blocks that had been thrown out or blasted out by the explosion.

Rafi gnawed at a beringed fist and complained, “He’ll *never* break through . . . look at how thick the wall is . . . and the size of those blocks . . . ! We’ll be here until—”

“He *will* do it!” Zenobia snapped. “He must!”

She glared at the metal man, her eyes slanting into wicked slits as she brought her willpower into stronger force. The Minaton seemed to gain strength. He picked up the iron bar and thrust it into a fracture in the stone. His gleaming golden back bulged and heaved as he pried at the tightly set blocks of stone with the thick bar.

The Minaton seemed to squeak with effort, and there was the gritty, popping sound of stone cracking. The massive block moved. The Minaton tossed aside the iron bar, now bent and speckled white from the stone dust, and bent to brace himself. His metal arms were spread wide and his huge, shovel-like hands were straining, gripping the hewn block. The was the sound of metal scraping along the grainy surface, squeaks of metal under pressure from the Minaton, but the stone barely moved.

Zenobia drew in a great breath, lowered her head much like the bull whose image was atop the bronze creature's shoulders, and her eyes almost popped with the effort of her mighty will.

Rafi made on ugly sound of frustration. "He will never break through . . ."

Zenobia's voice was strained, her fiery eyes desperate. "He must! Minaton! Exert all the power I created in you . . . now!"

The Minaton heaved . . . the stone shifted in a gritty rasp of sound . . . but suddenly, with a roar like the thunder of an avalanche, dust exploded downward, then rivers of sand gouted from around the block, and fragments of shattered stone sprayed out of the hole. Still the Minaton strained at the stubborn block. Suddenly the block gave way, splitting, toppling forward.

The Minaton's metal feet could not gain a purchase on the shifting sands pouring into the opening and he slipped. The great bronze, bull-headed monster fell backward with the two great fragments of stone falling with him. Dust clouds billowed out and Rafi choked on them, throwing his hand across his face.

But Zenobia only slitted her eyes against the dust. She watched, drained and impassive, as the dust settled. She knew what she would see.

It was Rafi who staggered into the last wisps of dust, his face broken and sagging as he saw the ruins of the mighty Minaton, crushed into useless fragments beneath the stones. Shards of dusty metal lay everywhere, and Rafi leaned against the chipped block that had crushed the Minaton. He looked at his mother through red-rimmed eyes, shaken and weak.

"What . . . what can we do now . . . ?"

Zenobia's face closed up. Determination replaced her drained disappointment. "He has done his work," she said. "Look . . ."

Rafi turned to see the final settling of dust being shoved away invisibly as a cold draft of air came from the hole in the pyramid. Rafi saw a darkness beyond and felt the cold air, heard it hissing as it streamed out into the warmth of the tropical valley.

“See?” said Zenobia. “He has broken through into the Shrine.” She stepped over the rubble toward the base of the pyramid, reaching out for her son, awkwardly dragging her bird-claw foot over the crumbled stones. “Give me your hand, Rafi.”

The young man took her hand, guided her over the shattered rock, and helped her up the now motionless river of sand and into the ragged hole exploded and pried into the pyramid. They stood a moment, letting their eyes accustom themselves to the darkness ahead. Then saw they were looking into a long dark passage.

“A torch, Rafi—get a torch.”

“Yes, Mother.” Rafi ran back out as Zenobia stepped over the ragged raw edges of the wall the Minaton had broken. The floor of the passage was covered with dust. Zenobia shivered and drew her gown around her.

Rafi jumped back in brandishing a torch and joined his mother. They moved off down the passage, their feet disturbing the dust, which floated up, then settled sluggishly. Zenobia’s clawed foot made a grotesque track in the dust of ages.

They huddled together, for the air was growing colder and colder as they moved toward the interior of the huge stone pyramid. The dragging lines of Zenobia’s monstrous foot marked their passage as did smoke traces that smudged the ceiling blocks.

“Look . . .” Rafi said, pointing ahead. There was light, a soft, pinkish light. Within a few steps they came to a turning and an opening, and there was no more need for the torch.

“Apollyon, protect us . . .” whispered Zenobia. “Belial, defend us . . .”

“T-the . . . S-shrine . . .” stammered Rafi.

CHAPTER 21

Sinbad's men approached the tumble of jagged stones that marked the forced entry into the Shrine. Swords and spears poised, they warily advanced on the tunnel entrance.

"Here is the place of the explosion," Sinbad said. "Look at the blackened stones. There is dust still in the air."

"They must be there, inside," Hassan said. He looked at his captain with a tigerish expression. "They cannot be far ahead!"

Melanthius caught up with them, gasping for breath, and Farah steadied his arm. Waving his men back, Sinbad stepped over the stones and approached the jagged hole. He could see the dark interior and caught the impression of a passage. He looked around at his men, saw Melanthius recovering his breath, and his attention was briefly caught by dark clouds beginning to form over the distant mountain tops. Trog arrived, with the baboon astride. Sinbad gestured for the troglodyte to approach but he seemed reluctant and apprehensive, making little guttural protests.

Farah and Dione joined Melanthius, looking with open mouths at the ruined shards of the Minaton. The horned head could be seen intact enough to make out its form. "A bull's head . . ." Dione whispered.

"And a giant's body," muttered Hassan.

"Zenobia's creation," Melanthius said softly, "almost certainly."

"Almighty Allah," Maroof grumbled, looking around with slitted, alert eyes, ". . . defend us . . ."

Melanthius raised his eyes from the broken fragments and his face changed to shock. "They should never have tried to force an entrance," he said angrily, pointing. "Now the power of the Shrine is threatened!" He clambered over broken stones to seize Sinbad's shoulder for attention. "The atmosphere inside destroyed . . . !" He waved a fist toward the dark interior. "The keys to the entrance—the *real* entrance—are useless!" He reached into his robe and yanked out the curious metal objects and flung them away in anger.

Sinbad looked around. "No sign of another entrance here, either."

Melanthius shook his head. "Under the ground . . . somewhere. It is clearly described in the scrolls. A series of sealed doors and

passageways, all underground.” He glared again at the ruined wall. “All to keep the temperature within the pyramid constant, exactly at the point of freezing. Disrupt the temperature and everything will be thrown out of control, out of balance, ruined . . .”

There was a distant rumble of thunder that punctuated the old Greek’s words. They all turned to look and saw dark clouds massing over the protecting wall of mountains that surrounded the Hyperborean valleys. In moments enough clouds had formed to pass a shadow over them. It was enough to trigger the actions of the old philosopher.

He started into the pyramid. “We must be swift!” he said, climbing over the blocks. Sinbad waved at his men and they followed quickly, but warily.

Melanthius was first to make his way, cautiously, into the black passage which led into the interior of the immense pyramid. Everyone except Trog followed. They waited to let their eyes adjust to the darkness, straining to use the little light that filtered in through the crude opening the Minaton had made.

It was Sinbad who first saw the tracks in the dust, for his eyes had been sharpened by thousands of nights at sea, with only the stars to guide him. “Those tracks . . . human and . . . some kind of beast . . .”

Distant thunder rumbled behind them, sending ominous echoes through the passageway. Sinbad shrugged and started into the dark corridor, his sword preceding him. Melanthius followed and the sailors formed a protective ring around Princess Farah and the baboon, who was their reason for this curious journey.

They touched fingers to the passage’s walls to guide them, and shortly Sinbad whispered there was light ahead. They moved silently in the thick dust, senses alert. Even the baboon was silent, and only the wheezing of the old man was heard.

But gasps of wonder came from their open mouths as they came through the last arch into the vast chamber hollowed out of the great pyramid.

Before them was the inside of the Shrine and their senses could not at once take it in. At first it was all shimmering and light, sparkling and glittering.

Then they began to put it together and realized the room was immense, a vast chamber filled with wonders. It was dreamlike and unlike anything any of them had ever seen. The four interior walls of the pyramid reached up, tilting and slanting to the metallic apex, which was decorated with a brilliant fan vaulting of enormous icicles. The very walls sparkled and shone, for they, too, were covered with a

protective layer of ice—dripping stalactites.

In the center of the vast floor was a high, round platform with several layers. On the highest level, enclosed in a circular pool, they could see a whirlpool spinning. There was also a humming sound that vibrated through the icicles like a violin.

From the metallic cone that capped the pyramid a column of brilliant light shone down. This light column sparkled and flashed in many colors, a perpetually active shaft of brilliance that played upon the center of the whirlpool.

“Almost beyond belief!” Melanthius said in an awed voice.

Dazzled by the sparkling magnificence, it took Sinbad a moment to remember to look around for Zenobia or any other enemy. His instincts of survival were being assaulted by the sheer shining walls, the unusual architecture, the unfamiliar shapes.

Farah took Sinbad’s arm and clung to him. She looked up at the radiance. “It’s . . . it’s as if the Aurora was being . . . was being filtered down through that metal cap . . . through that cone and into the whirlpool . . .”

Melanthius took a few steps more into the great room. His eyes sought to absorb everything at once. The humming sound that seemed synchronized to the whirlpool was not the only sound he heard. There was a strange, droning hum that was unlike anything the old philosopher had ever heard. It seemed artificial, a steady, even sound, and not the moaning of a creature or the sigh of wind.

“That must be the source of energy . . . up there,” Sinbad said.

Melanthius looked up at the undulating smoke that obscured the apex, and at the emanation of rays that poured down their light. “Drawn from the Crown of Apollo itself,” he said. “The princess was correct . . .”

“The secret of the Arimaspi . . .” Dione said in a whisper.

But Melanthius was ignoring his companions, his eyes darting about trying to make order out of the chaos of impression. He noticed at one side of the platform, leaning against the pyramid wall, was a complicated loop of gigantic golden chains which supported a cage large enough to contain a human. The cage was metalwork, and finely done. The old Greek’s eyes went along the chains and he saw they were counterweighted and controlled by a chain that passed through a hole in the staircase that lead up to the pool in the platform’s top.

Around the big circular platform Melanthius saw four niches, and guessed that each one faced the four cardinal points of the compass. He had noted that the pyramid itself was aligned that way and the

niches corresponded properly. Within each niche was a huge beast of some sort, frozen into protective blocks of ice.

Melanthius limped around the platform, inspecting everything. He saw that each of the strange beasts was positioned *couchant,* sitting or squatting within the niche. One was a griffon, another a sphinx. The Greek walked on, seeing that the next one was another heraldic beast and the last a gigantic primitive creature.

"Are those their gods?" Farah asked, her voice hushed.

Melanthius looked at the beasts in the niches and saw that one of them was a monstrously large saber-toothed tiger encased in a prison of ice.

"The Guardian of the Shrine," Melanthius said, touching the smooth, uneven surface of the frozen water. Sinbad joined the wise man and wiped his palm across the ice.

"The ice is melting!" he said in surprise. There was a roll of thunder heard distantly through the funnel of the passage to the outside. Sinbad became aware that there was water beginning to drip from the thousands of hanging ice knives over their heads. He knew they didn't have much time.

Maroof was nervous and he kept gripping and re-gripping his scimitar tightly, although he didn't think whatever dangers this place contained would be much deterred by one man's blade. He saw that at the lower edges of the slanted walls, in the shadows, were bodies frozen in ice. There were Egyptian-style support columns lining the walls, and between them were massive blocks of ice that contained the shadowy and frozen bodies.

There was a sharp crack as one of the great icicles broke loose and fell toward the floor. "Look out!" Hassan shouted. The icicle crashed into the stone floor like the falling of a hundred windows, and Sinbad's party eyed the glittering ceiling nervously.

"We must act at once," Melanthius said. He pulled out the scrolls and unrolled them, his face serious and frowning as he studied them. He only looked up to compare a scroll to the chamber interior and orient himself. He ignored the increasing drip of water from the overhead icicles and didn't even look up when another icicle fell. The crack of its departure from the ceiling clusters and the resulting smash on the wet floor were like the snapping of a thousand sword blades. Another fell in moments, with the same ear-splitting noise. Everyone but the old Greek watched the ceiling nervously, and kept back near the archway into the passage to the exterior.

"The chains and the cage," Dione said. "Just as described in the scrolls, Father,"

“Yes,” muttered the sage absently. He pointed at the platform. “We must pass Kassim through the column of light, in the cage, as soon as possible . . .”

Sinbad looked up at the flashing particles of electrical energy that were cascading down the shimmering column of ethereal light into the murmuring whirlpool. He nodded in agreement and ran down the platform and examined the chains that controlled the cage.

An icicle crashed, stinging Sinbad with shards of ice and splashing him from the thin pool of ice water that now covered the chamber floor. He ignored the near hit and continued his examination, tracing the chains as they came and went, in and out of the hole in the stone steps. He followed the chains as they went up toward the apex of the pyramid, where they disappeared into a grayed yellow-green mist. In that mist there were swirling and flashing particles of electrical energy drawn from the Aurora Borealis outside. The chain reappeared and came down to the bejeweled cage large enough to hold a man easily.

Sinbad struggled with the chains, trying to decide just how they should be manipulated, while Melanthius began directing operations. He called across to Farah. “Quickly now . . . bring Kassim to the top of the platform, and into the cage.”

As Farah brought the baboon down the steps from the tunnel and across the floor, the old philosopher searched in his robes until he found a phial of liquid. Then he watched impatiently as Farah assisted Kassim up the steps of the whirlpool platform. She glanced at Sinbad and saw that he was ready, holding only a taut chain and watching.

“Come on, Kassim,” she urged. Sinbad rattled the chains as he gave the cage a test move. Suddenly a scream echoed through the icy chamber.

“Kassim will never be Caliph!”

The scream echoed around the room, making it difficult to decide where it came from, but Sinbad recognized Zenobia’s shrill voice. Releasing the chains, Sinbad’s hand went for his sword and it hissed from his scabbard, glistening in the shimmering light from the column of Aurora brilliance.

From out of the shadows streaked Rafi, running hard, a knife in his hand and an expression of fanatic vengeance on his face. Behind him Zenobia appeared from behind the ice coffins, screaming, her face contorted with hate and fury. “Not the animal! Kill *Melanthius!* They are helpless without him! Kill the Greek!”

Rafi raced down the steps as Sinbad started up from around the curve of the circular platform. The witch-woman’s son knocked Farah down as she tried to protect the screaming, gibbering baboon. The

princess tumbled down the steps to the floor as Rafi launched himself on the snarling baboon. The knife flashed as they grappled, then they fell sideways and rolled bumpily down the steps.

Melanthius got in Sinbad's way as he leapt down the steps toward the tumbling Farah and the fiercely fighting pair of Rafi and the baboon.

Rafi and the baboon splashed out upon the icy floor, snarling and biting, both of them. Rafi's knife skittered along the stone slabs as he missed the twisting anthropoid. He uttered an unintelligible cry and raised his arm high to plunge the knife into the baboon's breast. Sinbad leapt at them, but missed as they rolled away, again locked in battle as the baboon reached up to seize the knife hand of his assailant.

Rafi screamed in pain as the powerful hands of the snouted baboon closed over his wrist. His fingers sprang open and the knife clattered to the floor and was kicked away by their shifting feet. The baboon launched himself up Rafi's tottering body, using the youth's torso as a climbing pole. His mouth, dripping saliva, opened and with a guttural growl the baboon sank his yellow fangs into the throat of the witch-woman's son.

Blood gushed forth, drenching the baboon and splashing into the melted ice water on the chamber floor. Rafi's blood-strangled scream was muffled as his jugular vein was ripped open. He fell, pulling the baboon with him, but the animal jumped free as Rafi fell limp at the feet of the guardian tiger in its ice coffin. The youth gave a jerk, blood pumping messily onto the floor—then he died.

Zenobia screamed like a soul in torment as a thunderclap filled the chamber with booming echoes. A half-dozen icicles broke free and smashed to the floor. Zenobia took a step toward her son, then saw that the blood no longer pumped out but merely spread thinly in the pool of melted ice water around him. Her nails ripped down her cheeks as she tottered crazily.

No one spoke as the witch-woman limped toward her dead son. Thunder came again—long, rippling and ominous. Zenobia stood looking down at her son, at the blood-splattered face now slack with death, at the beringed fingers lying in his own life's fluid. Another icicle crashed upon the steps, sending stinging particles of ice in every direction.

The thunder increased, and when Hassan looked nervously at the arch to the passage by which they had entered, he saw blue flashes of light: distant lightning.

The sound of a high wind came, a keening, rising wind that stirred

the ancient dust in the passage and sent tinkling eddies through the melting icicles overhead. More water dripped until it was almost a light rain.

Melanthius was clearly worried about the time factor. He gestured to Sinbad. “Bring Kassim. Let us pray that the gods of the Arimaspi grant us the time!” He looked again at his scrolls and muttered, “Hurry, hurry . . .”

Sinbad spoke over his shoulder to Hassan and Maroof as he took the baboon’s hand. “Keep careful watch on the witch,” he said. “Come, Kassim. This is the last time you’ll need your baboon strength and speed.”

Hassan and Maroof looked with disgust and still some fear at Zenobia, who stood like a frozen statue, head hanging down, and at her clawed foot. They exchanged glances, then looked up as another icicle snapped loose and plummeted to the floor beyond the platform, where it showered fragments of ancient ice all about.

A small icicle fell near Zenobia, splashing in the water as it broke, but she paid it no attention. The blood of her son was spreading out upon the surface of the water like a red mist.

Sinbad and Melanthius stopped briefly at the top of the platform to look down into the vortex of swirling liquid that was bathed in the light from above. The spinning whirlpool seemed to draw down the emanations, sucking up the shimmering rays of the Aurora light. Farah took a few steps toward the platform, clenching her hands together, watching Sinbad leave her brother, the enchanted baboon, and begin to manipulate the winch chains.

Even the sailors were drawn toward the drama that was about to unfold. None of them noticed that Zenobia had raised her head. None noticed the apparently shattered and defeated figure, a lonesome and pathetic creature, staring at the niche above her dead son’s corpse.

None noticed that the ice was fast melting around the saber-toothed tiger. None noticed the rising level of melted water on the chamber floor. The unfolding drama on the platform was much too compelling.

Zenobia’s face, running with blood from her fingernail scratches, was twisted with fury, grief, and defiance. The wind increased. More icicles fell, one striking Hassan on the shoulder and causing him to curse. Maroof wiped away the rainlike drippings and kept his eyes upon the platform.

Melanthius took the small phial clenched in his hand and administered the liquid contents to the baboon. Then he took its hand and led the baboon to the waiting cage. The Aurora light, reflecting from the vortex of the pool, made rippling bars of light over them.

The old Greek helped the baboon into the cage, then wedged the empty phial in with him, and secured the cage door.

The old philosopher turned toward Sinbad and signaled. The husky sea captain heaved on the chains and with a rattle the cage lifted and swung out over the whirlpool and into the descending column of swirling, radiant particles of light.

The cage and the baboon were wreathed in the shimmering cloud, and thunder splashed sound over them all. Sinbad glanced at Melanthius and saw him muttering silently to himself, as if he were reciting a prayer or incantation.

Sinbad looked back at the baboon in the cage. The cage swung gently, still wreathed in the brilliant column of light. Water dripped from the ceiling, slashing into the pool that now covered the chamber floor completely. Lightning flashed blue-white down the passage to the outside, and moments later the thunder came.

Zenobia was staring hard, her eyes changing . . .

Her eyes became panther eyes . . . tiger's eyes.

Evil eyes . . .

Slanted fierce slits, glowing fire . . .

Before her the ice that shrouded the great primitive tiger was melting fast, almost gurgling away. No one noticed, for their attention was wholly upon the cage in the shaft of sparkling light.

Melanthius stared at the cage, which was hidden within a yellow-green vapor. Only the barest outline of the outer bars could be seen. Melanthius stopped moving his lips and signaled to Sinbad.

The sea captain heaved again on the chains. They rattled and the cage swung back to the edge of the pool. It was filled with the thick yellow-green vapor, leaking out through the openings between the bejeweled bars. Melanthius took a step toward it and stopped.

The cage door was slowly opening . . .

The strange vapor was drifting away . . .

Farah uttered a cry and started up the steps, tears streaming from her eyes.

The cage door swung wide and the vapors cleared. The sailors blinked and their mouths sagged open. On the platform stood a handsome and bewildered young man, swaying slightly.

"Kassim!" Princess Farah cried as she climbed.

Farah embraced her brother, then touched his cheek tenderly. "Kassim . . . Kassim . . ."

The young man blinked and semed to focus for the first time. "Farah

. . . sister . . . my Farah . . .”

They embraced tightly and Melanthius permitted himself to smile in triumphant joy at Sinbad, beaming with unashamed pride and emotion. Sinbad crossed to the old scholar and put his arm around him in a congratulatory hug.

Kassim crossed quickly to Sinbad, trailed by a brightly smiling—and very tearful—Farah. The young prince clasped Sinbad’s hand. “My friend . . .” he said huskily.

Sinbad grinned. “Master Melanthius was responsible for it all,” he said, indicating the old Greek.

Kassim made a slight bow of thanks to them both. “How will I ever be able to thank you?” he said, looking from one to the other.

Sinbad shrugged and slapped the prince on his arm. “I’ve repaid an old debt . . . a life for a life . . .”

Kassim turned again to Farah to embrace her, but his eyes fell on Dione. A shadow of puzzlement crossed his face, then he smiled. “Dione . . .” He went quickly down the steps and embraced her.

They all started down the steps, but stopped with surprise as a peal of thunder sounded, booming through the passage. The blue-white lighting flashes were closer and closer to the following thunderclaps. Ice snapped and tinkled and fell like broken glass, splashing into the water spread across the ancient stone floor.

Melanthius suddenly turned sharply and looked down at the pool as he detected a change in the rhythm. The whirlpool was slowing, eddying and moving sluggishly. The old man looked up to see the column of light coming down from the apex flickering and diminishing in brilliance.

“Not a moment too soon,” he said to Sinbad. “The power of the Shrine is failing.”

Sinbad frowned and jerked a thumb toward the exterior. “And outside in the Valley?”

“The beginning of the end,” the old man muttered gloomily. He started down the stairs, holding up his robe awkwardly. “The end of Hyperborea,” he cried out bitterly. “The triumphant legacy of a dead civilization lost forever because of a malicious woman’s greed and ambition . . . because of *her!”* His hand thrust out from the folds of his robe to point an accusing finger at Zenobia.

But she did not seem to hear. Her face was turned away and none saw the savage yellow eyes, burning, staring, demanding . . .

Melanthius and Sinbad, just behind Farah, Kassim, and Dione, started toward the exit. They did not notice that the eyes of the saber-

toothed tiger flicked open. If they had seen this, and seen Zenobia's transformed orbs, they would have shuddered at the uncanny resemblance.

But none saw the evil and savage eyes, none the ice melting swiftly around the tiger. They were concerned with the falling icicles, with the deafening thunder, with the water on the floor, with getting out.

As Farah and Kassim reached the sailors there was a gigantic cracking and they turned to see the ice splitting away from the great tawny figure of the entombed tiger. The creature wrenched and twisted itself, cracking more ice, sending it flying, splashing into the melted ice shards upon the floor.

"It's moving!" Melanthius cried over Dione's scream.

"It's coming alive!" Hassan yelled.

"Run!" Sinbad commanded. He swung toward Zenobia, to take her with them, and stopped in startled surprise.

The witch was changing.

She was becoming smoky . . . thinning . . .

The image of the sorceress was quickly only a silhouette of smoke. It drifted up and hovered ominously. Sinbad and his friends, open-mouthed, backed slowly away.

The smoke curved and turned even as the tiger shook loose the last shards of ice and stepped stiff-legged onto the wet floor. The smoke drifted down, melting into the raging animal. The great tiger quivered, then let out a ferocious roar that brought down still more swords of ice. It seemed to gain strength as the drifting mist that had been Zenobia metamorphosed into the great tawny body.

The tiger roared again, seeming to gain still more strength. Its eyes swept the chamber and fastened on the huddle of humans. The eyes of the tiger flamed and the humans backed away.

The beast came at them, padding through the thin pools of water, ignoring the thunder, ignoring the falling ice crystals, focusing only upon Sinbad and his group. The great jungle beast stepped over the body of Rafi, now almost floating in the ice water, the center of a growing pink pool.

Farah's scream rose above the wind that was moaning through the chamber, gouting dust and sand into the vast room. The scream echoed through the passageway and was heard by Trog outside. The great beast-man hesitated, then overcame his fear of the pyramid and climbed over the rubble into the passage, taking the Minaton's iron bar with him.

Sinbad thrust back the two women, Melanthius, and the still shaky

Kassim. The spears and swords of his two men came down, pointing at the immense tiger. They backed away slowly, watching the stalking tiger closely, moving back up the steps to the passage by which they had gained entrance to the Shrine.

A cluster of icicles fell upon the tiger, an encrustation of ice that would have sliced a man to bloody lumps, but the great animal only roared out a defiant snarl as he shrugged off the ice knives. But then the tiger stopped, its ears laying back flat and its tawny body crouching instinctively.

Sinbad turned to see what new danger lay behind them and saw the great hairy figure of Trog stepping into the chamber. The beast-man lumbered down the steps, hefting the Minaton's thick iron bar.

The tiger faced his new adversary with a roar, but Trog never stopped. Sinbad and his group made way for the lumbering giant and Trog went through them, directly at the tiger. He slammed the butt of the iron bar upon the stone slabs of the floor and the sound clanged throughout the chamber like a great bell.

More icicles fell and some of them struck Trog on the back but he ignored them as he prepared to do battle with the snarling tiger. The tiger's roar blended into an even greater peal of thunder, which was almost physical as it boomed throughout the chamber. A section of the ice cover fell, exposing the stones of the pyramid, and made a great splash on the other side of the platform. More individual icicles fell, and Trog uttered a growl at the tail-swishing tiger.

"Back . . ." Sinbad ordered, and his people moved up the steps slowly.

The tiger crouched for a spring and Trog moved in on the sword-mouthed fighter. The tiger sprang, all teeth and slashing claws, and the two great beasts smashed together. They fell into the water and rolled about in savage combat, their grunts and roars filling the ancient chamber.

"We must help Trog," Sinbad said. To Melanthius and Kassim he gave a brusque order. "Take the princess and Dione back to the Gate."

Kassim pulled at his arm. "We shall not leave you." He reached toward Sinbad's waist. "Give me your dagger . . ."

"You are too weak, my lord," he said gently. Then his voice roared with the command voice of an officer used to obedience. "Back to the Gate!"

"Sinbad . . ." Farah's voice was muffled by the tiger's roar.

"Do as I say!" he commanded, his eyes already planning an attack. "And if I do not join you within the hour, then set out for the ship at

once." The tiger and Trog both roared defiance at the other and splashed water toward the group with their shifting feet. "Then Charak . . . before the seventh moon is full!"

Kassim let his hand drop. "You are right . . . I must think of Charak . . ."

Melanthius took Farah's arm and his voice was grim. "Come, Princess . . . Dione . . ."

Farah reached out for the sea captain, her emotions suddenly showing raw and trembling. "Sinbad! Sinbad!"

"Do as I say!" Sinbad ordered, with steel in his voice and steel in his hand.

Melanthius put his arm around the two women and spoke grimly. "Aye-aye, Captain Sinbad . . ." He turned Farah and Dione toward the arch. Kassim hesitated, then followed, his bewildered gaze sweeping over the vast dripping chamber.

"Farah . . . what is this place?"

"I will explain," Melanthius said. *"As* we go to the Gate . . ."

Motioning to Hassan and Maroof, Sinbad went gingerly down the steps, circling the colossal combatants, hoping to help Trog. The tiger broke from Trog, snarling and spitting, and saw the new menace starting to surround him. As he turned toward the nearest human, Hassan, Sinbad saw his chance and rushed in, lunging at the great tiger's head with his sword. But the beast saw the movement and turned swiftly and with one swipe of his paw sent Sinbad reeling.

The adventurer splashed into the water as he fell, then came up with his shirt ripped away and blood streaming from deep cuts across his chest. Sinbad writhed in pain, his colorful shirt hanging in ragged shreds from his broad shoulders.

Hassan and Maroof yelled as they charged in with their spears to cover their fallen leader. They thrust their points at the great beast, but the tiger swung his powerful claws and disemboweled Maroof and with the backhand knocked Hassan to the floor, unconscious. Trog lumbered over to stand by the swaying and wounded Sinbad. The caveman looked at Sinbad, then started forward to do combat with the saber-toothed beast by himself.

But in spite of his massive strength and his undaunted courage, he was no match for the tiger's slashing teeth, savage claws, and the almost inhuman fighting instincts. The iron bar splashed to the floor and was lost. The troglodyte's clumsy movements made him a victim to the more nimble tiger. The tiger sprang, bearing Trog down. They splashed and the saber-tooth's jaws slashed at Trog. The beast-man

could only fight with his bare hands. He tried to throttle the tiger, but the ripping rear legs were slowly shredding the hairy flesh off his legs and lower body.

Trog groaned in pain as the slashing claws made an ugly shambles of his body, shredding matted hair, sinew, flesh, and muscle. Trog groaned mightily, and the tiger broke loose from Trog's stranglehold and plunged his great fangs into Trog's throat. With a rip, a scream, a terrific wrenching of his body, Trog was killed, bloodily, and with great pain. He slumped down, dead, the rising waters almost closing over him.

The tiger roared in triumph, then turned toward Sinbad.

The sea captain turned, tripping, and fell into the water. There was something under his hand. He seized it and pulled it from the blood-stained water. It was the Minaton's thick iron bar.

Resolutely, the bloody Sinbad advanced on the tiger. He stepped over the dead and mutilated body of Trog, hefting the pointed bar. The tiger shifted at once, crouching as if to spring as it sloshed through the water. Sinbad turned to ward it off and was cornered between two columns. Behind were the frozen bodies of the Arimaspi. The tiger slashed out suddenly and Sinbad barely managed to parry the hit with the iron bar.

The tiger's claws scraped along the steel, almost knocking it from Sinbad's grasp. The sailor saw a movement and realized Hassan was recovering from his near mortal blow. The tough sailor staggered to his feet almost behind the tiger, his sword still in his fist. He took in the situation at once, and, without thinking, Hassan threw his sword at the tiger.

The great saber-tooth had been about to leap at Sinbad but the sword stuck deep into his side. The beast roared in pain, his head up. Icicles fell in a rain of deadly diamonds and nearby a portion of the ice shroud fell from the ceiling in a ragged crash.

The tiger twisted around toward Hassan, eyes glaring, for the moment forgetting Sinbad. It slowly began to stalk toward the bloody sailor, and Hassan, weaponless, began to retreat.

Sinbad saw his chance and made a dash for the staircase, yelling wild shouts, hoping to distract the saber-tooth from Hassan and to gain a little height from which to fight the great animal.

But the tiger attacked Hassan first, mauling him badly, knocking the already hurt sailor back into the water. Sinbad leaped and swung the heavy iron bar into the tiger's side. The prehistoric beast swiveled, roaring in pain and anger, and Sinbad once again splashed toward the stairs. Icicles fell about him and the thunder blended with the tiger's

scream.

Holding the iron bar, Sinbad slowly backed up the stairs of the whirlpool platform, watching the tiger come toward him. The beast was limping now, its head lowered, its eyes lambent and deadly. The tiger came close and Sinbad swung the iron bar at its face, missing the sensitive nose as the tiger snatched back its head. But the primitive killing machine was more careful now. It pawed viciously at the prodding iron spear as it moved along and up the steps, to gain altitude upon the wounded Sinbad.

Sinbad gained the wider step of the center level of the tiered platform, but a blow of the tiger almost caused him to lose the spear. He thrust it out quickly and backed up more steps. The tiger struck again and the blow knocked Sinbad tumbling back to the wider step below.

The tiger crouched for a killing leap but a chunk of the ice shroud fell, splashing partly into the sluggish whirlpool and partially right next to the angry beast. The tiger shied away, breaking his concentration on Sinbad. A single huge icicle plummeted down, smashing into a thousand glittering shards right next to the saber-tooth, and startled it again.

Sinbad, shaken by the blow and the fall, got his wits together and swung his precious pointed iron bar around at the tiger just as the great beast sprang. The butt of the harpoonlike bar was against a step, bracing it well as Sinbad threw himself back to hold it tight and steady. The flying body of the tawny saber-tooth impaled itself on the point of the iron spear with an agonizing roar. Its legs kicked and squirmed as the momentum carried him over the head of Sinbad, wrenching the iron bar from his grasp.

The butt of the spear gave him a painful blow on the thigh, but as Sinbad twisted around to see the tiger tumbling down he knew that the fatal blow had been struck. Arcing over his head, the tiger had missed Sinbad and crashed down the steps to the floor. It lay on its back, a sword in its side and the iron bar imbedded deeply in its chest. It clawed the air, screamed shrilly, and kicked out.

Sinbad got to his feet, ran down the steps, and yanked Hassan's sword from the beast's side. He plunged the sword again and again into the writhing body until the animal stopped moving.

Then he plunged the sword once more into the brain of the great saber-tooth and stood, bleeding and exhausted. He wiped sweat and blood from his face and looked around.

The rising waters had covered Rafi's body, which was floating with only the hump of his back showing. Icicles were falling almost

continuously, and the thunderous booms of the lightning storm persisted outside. Hassan stirred.

Sinbad staggered over to his friend, pulling the bloody and badly mauled sailor from the water. Hassan moaned, his head lolling loosely. “Hassan!” Sinbad shouted over the noise of the storm and the crackling of ice. “Hassan!”

“Wha—?”

“We must get away! Hassan!”

The wounded Hassan shook his head to clear it and some consciousness returned. “Sinbad . . .” he breathed. “What happened . . . ?”

“Get up!” the adventurer snapped, and turned to slosh through the water to the fallen Maroof. The muscular sailor was dead, disemboweled by the savage saber-tooth. Sinbad went back to Hassan to help him to his feet and get started toward the archway out.

They had moved only a few feet when they heard a great crackling, breaking, snapping noise and looked up to see tons of ice falling as one whole ice shroud, one whole inward slanting pyramid wall, come crashing down at them.

Sinbad and Hassan dove for the dubious shelter of the Egyptian-style columns along the lower part of the wall. The tons of crystal ice fell upon the corpse of the tiger and upon the body of Rafi. With the ice came some of the inner facing of stone from the pyramid wall. The avalanche barely missed Sinbad and his companion but the tidal wave of water knocked them off their feet.

They staggered up, dripping water and blood. The cracking noises continued and they looked fearfully up to see more fragments of ice and stones falling.

“It’s coming down!” Sinbad shouted, and led the sprint for the passage entrance. They sloshed through the water and Hassan staggered under a glancing blow by a fragment of ice, but Sinbad grabbed his arm and helped him along. Looking up, Sinbad saw that the Aurora Borealis light was growing fainter and fainter.

“Sinbad! Look!”

The sprawled, dead body of the saber-tooth was drenched with ice water, lying partially in the rising pool of bloodied water that covered the entire surface of the inner Shrine. The dead corpse had one leg thrust out, and at the end of that leg . . . a huge, transformed bird’s claw.

Another section of the ice shroud collapsed, covering the tiger’s corpse with glittering white. “Move . . . !” Sinbad snapped.

They splashed across the great hall and up the steps to the outside passage. Ice and stones fell just behind them as they plunged into the gloom and raced along the dusty hall. The wind was cold and snow was being driven in through the ragged opening. Wet and shivering, Hassan and Sinbad stumbled out of the passage into the Valley of the Shrine.

Everything was shrouded in freshly fallen snow.

The tropical trees were wilted and crisped by the chill, their leaves turning brown and curling in death. The grass was brittle, buried under the snow that would soon turn to eternal ice. The birds, butterflies, and flowers were gone.

The wind howled through the shrinking trees and Sinbad took Hassan's arm. It was going to be a long and possibly deadly climb to the Gates.

CHAPTER 22

Melanthius huddled in the lee of the massive Gate as the storm swept around him. He was bundled into his furs and at his feet were the furs for Sinbad, Hassan, and Maroof. Kassim, who was beyond the open Gate with Farah and the others, had refused the furs until those who had come so far to save him were clothed and warm. He was sheltered from the worst of the wind by his sister and by the others, who braced themselves against the blizzard before him.

The entire Valley seemed to be in the grip of a spectacular storm. Snow clouds whirled under the lash of a tornado-force wind. Avalanches thundered down from the nearby mountain cliffs as the fresh snow built up and fell. Later, the old Greek knew, the Valley would be packed with snow, the mountains encased with eternal ice, and there would be few avalanches.

The old man sighed and mourned the green and peaceful valley, once a Paradise, and fast becoming an empty, glacial wilderness indistinguishable from miles and miles of ice and snow in every direction. And he mourned the knowledge lost, but not the deaths of Rafi or . . . he hoped . . . Zenobia.

It seemed to the old man he had been there a long time. He was fearful for Kassim's health and for the delicate Farah, as well as for himself and the sailors. He was old, he thought, and had lived a long and interesting life. The sailors were tough and used to hardship, and besides, they were volunteers. But Farah and Kassim were pawns in Zenobia's ambitious plan of domination and revenge. It was not their fault they were trapped here at the top of the world, in a frozen Hell of ice and wind that cut like a thousand knives. For their sake Melanthius hoped Sinbad and his men survived and were quickly arrived. He squinted into the swirling snowflakes, but saw nothing.

Sinbad took a step and fell into a knee-deep hole hidden by the snow. He pulled himself out and once again took Hassan's arm. The tough sailor was all but out on his feet, the blood frozen on his ripped garments, his hair and beard frosted, his eyes slitted and unseeing. Sinbad was almost in as bad a condition. The deep wounds from the tiger's claws had stopped bleeding, due to the intense cold, but their thin clothing, rent and hanging in tatters from their bodies, was little

protection. The wet clothes had frozen into stiff panels, which broke with their movement. They were almost naked in the blizzard, chilled to the bone, and weak from loss of blood.

Hassan staggered and almost fell. Sinbad glanced back at the pyramid as he clutched at the stumbling sailor. He heard a crumbling roar, even above the howling wind of the storm, and saw the pyramid start to collapse upon itself. The bright metal cap went first, tipping, with puffs of frost, then the whole structure began to shake. The cap fell to the side and slithered down the buckling walls of the pyramid, tumbling and bending. A gaping hole opened suddenly in the snow-covered side of the great pile of blocks as the inner walls collapsed, bringing down the exterior walls.

Sinbad saw a splash of water that seemed to freeze as it flew into the air, falling as snow and sleet upon the collapsing pyramid. Slowly, very slowly, the great blocks fell in upon themselves throwing up dust, which was swept away by the howling wind. Then there was no more movement. The pyramid, the secret Shrine of the Four Elements of the ancient race of the Arimaspi, was gone. What remained was a pile of broken stones rapidly being covered by the falling snow.

The sea captain gritted his teeth against the biting cold. Getting warm, getting his friend to shelter—that was more important than anything. Pragmatically, Sinbad started putting one foot in front of the other, pulling at his staggering, stumbling companion, moving through the drifts toward the Gate wall high above.

Looking up, Sinbad was almost blinded by the snow, but he had a brief glimpse of the wall spanning the gorge. He lowered his head and kept on slugging through the deepening drifts.

They fell and Hassan moaned with pain, almost out of his mind with delirium. They lay in the drift for a long moment. Too long a moment. Hassan did not want to rise.

“Leave me . . .”

“No. Get up.” Sinbad tugged at him.

“No . . . pain . . . just leave me . . . go on . . . I’ll only . . . hold you . . . back . . .”

Sinbad lurched to his feet, the snow that had covered him in those brief moments falling away from his body. It was cold. Bitterly cold. Sinbad had never felt so cold. He wanted to fall down into the drift and rest . . . sleep . . .

Sleep forever . . .

He wrenched up his head and snarled at Hassan with his best battle-deck voice of command. “Hassan, you worthless dog! Get on your feet,

you camel dungfly!" He kicked at the motionless man but the drifts softened the blow. *"Get up!"* he cried. He tugged at Hassan, who fought him. Off balance, Sinbad almost fell down. He knew if he went down then he was lost.

His face was inches from Hassan's frosted countenance. The words came cruelly. "Hassan, you are the dregs! The vomit of the sea! A worthless woman fit only for the lowest crib! A baby feigning men's work!"

"Why you . . . !"

The big sailor thrust out a fist, but Sinbad dodged and grabbed it. "On your feet, you bag of dog dung! Only women die in snowdrifts! Only weaklings give up! What's a little tiger bite? Get up!"

"You . . . !" Hassan swung again but Sinbad staggered back, his voice mocking.

"Die here then and I'll tell the men at the tavern you died begging for life . . ."

"Sinbad, I'll kill you for this . . . !" Hassan got to his knees, his torso swaying.

"Lie down, dog, and die like you lived! Swiller of wine! Debaucher of women! Weakling! Beardless boy masquerading as a man!" Sinbad was hoarse from shouting over the wind, sick and weak, but he kept pounding at his friend's ego.

"Don't get up! Sleep, you lizard! Lie down here and I'll tell Oki and Achmed and Tamilar you died whimpering and crying like a child!" The hurt in Hassan's dazed eyes almost made Sinbad stop, but he saw the anger was giving strength to Hassan's bloody limbs. He staggered back. "Goodbye, Hassan-the-Weak! Goodbye, dogmeat . . . I will tell the women how you died. Jamilia and Sumatra, remember them? They will know you died without a sword, died sobbing, died without trying to live . . . !"

"You lie!" Hassan cried and lurched to his feet. He swayed, then plowed through the snow after the retreating Sinbad. "Stay and fight, you coward!" he screamed into the driving snow.

"Catch me, weakling . . . !"

Hassan cursed and staggered on. The snows closed in around them, howling like demons long denied a feast. The Valley of the Shrine was dead and the gods of ice were dancing.

Melanthius left the small fire they had built out of the wind and resolutely staggered into the blizzard to wade back through the drifts to the monstrous Gate. There was nothing below but swirling

whiteness. Nothing could be seen.

“I’ll wait a few more minutes,” he muttered to himself. “Then we must go. Farah and Kassim must be saved . . .”

The winds howled and the cold was almost more then the old man could take. He found the bundles of furs and shook them free of snow and started to take them back. Kassim was blue, but still stubborn. Now he would don a dead man’s clothing and they would go.

A movement . . .

A spot of color covered at once by the flying snow . . .

The old Greek shielded his eyes against the wind and looked through ice-covered lashes, searching the white gorge below for the movement of color he had seen . . . or thought he had seen.

“Sinbad staggered out of the howling wind, the spot of color a rock as he looked up at the Gate. Melanthius started down, crying out to Farah and Dione for help. The wind whipped away his voice and he labored down alone.

Sinbad looked at him with wild, staring eyes, but made no protest when Melanthius forced his chill, blue limbs into the furs.

“Hassan . . .” Sinbad choked out. He gestured behind, but the old Greek saw no one.

“How far behind?”

A weak smile on Sinbad’s face cracked some of the frost. “Just . . . a . . . curse . . . behind . . .”

Melanthius looked again and saw a whitened figure lurching through the drifts below. He shoved Sinbad toward the Gate. “There’s a fire up there—go!” Then he went lower down and seized Hassan’s arm.

The sailor yanked back, his face wild and murderous. “I’ll kill you . . . !” Then he saw the fur-covered figure was Melanthius and he looked around wildly. “Where’s Sinbad?” he rasped.

The old scholar pointed up the gorge. He held out the furs and Hassan let himself be dressed. Then he lurched up the trail, falling twice, and staggered through the Gate. Melanthius was right behind and guided the wounded man into the rock niche, where a crude shelter had been made.

Sinbad looked up from the fire, his face cleared of ice and frost, the blood starting to run a bit again. He grinned at Hassan and held out a steaming bowl of soup. “Late for dinner again, eh?” he said.

Hassan recoiled as if struck, swaying dangerously. Then he stumbled forward to a seat by the fire, his frown giving way to a

wicked grin. “Sinbad . . . Sinbad . . .” he muttered. “You are a devil. I . . . could have . . . killed you . . .”

Sinbad shook his head, grinning. “Perhaps . . . anger can be a great tool.”

“We’d given you up for dead,” Farah said to Hassan and Sinbad as Melanthius helped the stiff Kassim into dead Maroof’s thick furs.

Hassan flicked his eyes over to his captain. “Aye . . . everyone but Sinbad . . .”

Kassim shrugged into the furs, his face still blue from the cold. “And my friend, Trog?” he asked anxiously.

Sinbad shook his head. “He died well against a great and powerful enemy . . . as did Maroof.”

Hassan nodded, gulping down the steaming soup. “Not a bad way to die.” He exchanged grins with Sinbad.

The captain of the expedition stood up. “Come, we’ve a long journey back to the ship.”

They moved into the wind and took a last look through the Gates. Everything was white, and only lumps showed anonymously. Already the snow was packing down into ice . . . and that ice would last forever.

“Doomed . . .” Melanthius muttered. “A few hours more, and the Valley will be nothing but a bleak stretch of ice and snow.”

Sinbad put his arm around Farah. “And Hyperborea?”

The old man shook his head. “Nothing but a legend now . . . a myth . . . one among many.”

“But we saw it,” Sinbad said.

“We were there,” Farah added.

Melanthius nodded, his eyes dark with gloom. “Do you think anyone will ever believe us?” He looked from one to another. “No, only a legend now, as, in time—” He grinned at Sinbad, his good humor breaking through the gloom—“in time, they will tell fanciful stories of ‘Sinbad the Sailor.’ ” Sinbad laughed and Hassan grunted cynically. “They will say, ‘He was never real, only an improbable hero from an incredible Arabian Nights tale.’ ” The old man’s smile was sad. “That’s how the world goes, my friend. Men don’t really care for the truth.”

Sinbad nodded in agreement. “Come on,” he commanded, and they turned their backs on the Valley at the world’s end and hurried off.

Further up the gorge Melanthius stopped, apparently to rest, but actually to get one more look back at the Valley.

It was all white. The winds sent white snow spinning across a bleak landscape. It was all gone.

The old man turned away. There was a tear in his eye. It froze before it got very far.

A gust of wind came up the gorge, chilling and strong, and one of the great Gates swung shut. A second gust moved the other Gate, then moments later, a chill and terrible wind swung the Gate closed, and in moments snow had piled against the monstrous face carved on it. Melanthius looked back, his fur hood fringed with tendrils of ice, his lashes stiff with frost. But the last vision of Hyperborea was shut off. Forever.

Snow began to settle across the vast grotesque face of stone, softening the features, blending it into the white landscape. Before the tiny figures were at the top of the gorge the face was almost covered.

CHAPTER 23

Sinbad's ship was encased in ice, but there was a thin plume of smoke that came from the cabin. Sinbad sighed deeply and looked back at the straggling line of exhausted travelers that was strung out behind him. They were plodding on, too tired to even be excited at seeing the ship again.

Sinbad struggled on through the snow, his eyes picking out details of the ship. They had hacked away the ice once or twice before and were due again. All superfluous wood had been cut away, undoubtedly to burn and keep them warm. Portions of the railing, the entire crew's quarters, even the decorations along the side had been pried loose or sawn off to be used.

The sea captain sighed. The ship was a wreck, but, still seaworthy, and, most importantly, the crew was alive. And they had waited through the blizzards and the fearful storms for his return.

"Ho, the ship!" he called out.

For a long moment there was no movement, no sound, and Sinbad was about to repeat his call when a bearded, frosted, befurred head stuck up over the railing.

"Sinbad!" croaked Aboo-seer. He called back to the others. "It's Sinbad!"

The frost-bitten adventurer climbed aboard and looked around in weary resignation. Aboo-seer looked sheepish. "It got cold," he muttered.

Sinbad clapped him on the back. "Wipe that look from your face, old friend—I would have done the same!"

"The spare mast, too?"

"The spare mast, my fine furniture, everything but the hull!"

Aboo-seer scuffed at the plating of thick ice on the deck. "Uh . . . speaking of your furniture . . . ah . . . it was easier to warm your one big cabin than the several cabins of the crew, and—"

Sinbad laughed. "There will be gold to buy a bigger ship, a better ship!" He turned to the opening in the railing to help Farah aboard, then Dione. Hassan boosted up the old Greek from below, then stumped wearily onto the deck himself. Kassim swung over the rail, too.

Sinbad shouted out to the remains of the crew that was coming from his cabin, their faces wreathed in frosted air. “Break out the axes! Chop away this ice! We’re sailing for home!”

A gong sent its golden boom throughout the throne room. The jeweled throne stood empty, but it was surrounded by the richly robed priests, officials, and various dignitaries. The colorful tapestries sent back glints of golden thread from the flaming braziers. Polished wood, silk, gold, polished steel spear points, jeweled turbans, and damask all sent their colors into the magnificence that was the coronation ceremony.

Incense from India and Persia scented the great room. Musicians played distantly. The rustle of silken gowns, the shuffle of polished boots on the parquet floor, the murmur of approving voices, the clink of swords and chanting of priests all filled the great room with sound.

Princess Farah came through a bowing corridor of nobles to where Sinbad stood unobtrusively by a pillar. He bowed to her, smiling. His scars were healed and all their gauntness from the torturous journey had gone. The sea captain was richly robed, with a new turban, a tunic edged in gold-worked braid, and soft leather boots. A jeweled dagger was stuck in his belt.

Farah was soft and lovely in a pale gown worked with tiny golden sunbursts and a dark cloak with the sunburst designs repeated. She wore the jeweled tiara of a princess of Charak, but her most dazzling possession, for Sinbad, was the smile directed at him.

“A great day,” he said to Farah.

“Yes . . . thanks to you,” she replied.

Sinbad grinned. “Hassan and my men thank you for the gold.” He pointed at the back wall, where the freshly washed and freshly robed crew was looking uncomfortable. “They would much rather be out spending some of it than being here.”

“But it is Kassim’s coronation day . . . Caliph of Charak!”

Sinbad smiled. “They would probably be much more comfortable robbing these rich nobles than trading compliments with them.”

Farah’s eyelashes swept her cheek as she asked softly, “And are they buying six wives?”

“At the rate they have been spending your uncle’s gold, they might be lucky to have enough left for a few goats.”

“But . . . I thought they fought for gold and—”

Sinbad touched her arm. “Princess, they must have a *reason.* No man wants to be thought a fool. To endanger yourself for nothing is foolish. To fight for a baboon is ridiculous. To fight for a prince that is

not even *your* prince is asinine. Ah . . . but to fight for gold Any man can understand that!"

"You mean . . . they needed some, um, *respectable* reason to go fighting?"

"To go *adventuring,* your highness. There is a great difference. If you say you fight for a smile from a princess, other men . . . who have not seen that smile . . . think you are mad. But if you say you are fighting for enough gold to buy six beautiful wives, then—" Sinbad spread his hands in an expressive gesture—"then all understand. There are no uncomfortable questions. Do you understand?"

The princess of Charak nodded. "I think so. Men like to be heroes, but heroes are often men who failed to have imagination, so they think they might seem foolish. So they give other reasons for their deeds." She smiled at Sinbad warmly. "But we need heroes. We've always had them."

"And made some men heroes that didn't deserve it," Sinbad said. "A man might kill a monster to save his life, not even knowing of the princess in the tower."

Farah shook her head. "But the best heroes—like *you,* Captain Sinbad—are those that know the danger and attempt the deed in any case."

"Aye," Sinbad agreed. "I grant you that courage is knowing danger, but proceeding . . . but . . ." He grinned. "But so is foolishness."

"Perhaps the two are not far separated?" Farah asked with a winsome smile. Sinbad was about to reply when Balsora the Regent, who would soon be surrendering the kingdom to the new Caliph, approached them.

"Your highness," Sinbad said, bowing in tribute.

"Captain Sinbad, I've thanked you before and I imagine I shall thank you again every time I see you," Balsora said. He wore a high turban, plumed and jeweled, a fur-trimmed cloak embroidered elegantly, and the famous Charak royal jewels. He carried the scepter of state, but it was his wide smile of friendship that Sinbad valued most.

"It was a worthy adventure," Sinbad said. "My men and I were glad to be of help."

There was a twinkle in Balsora's eyes. "You work only for glory, then? I need not have rewarded your men with those chests of gold?"

Sinbad grinned back. "Every man likes to be paid his worth. Especially the crew of my ship."

"Half of the kingdom would not be payment enough," Balsora said munificently. "And I am certain Kassim would agree." The turbaned

Regent turned toward the entrance to the throne room. “Kassim will be crowned today . . . and just in time to satisfy the ancient laws. He will be certified as Caliph of Charak . . . and that is something we thought not possible a short time ago.”

The shrewd Vizier looked wisely at Sinbad, and his twinkling eyes touched on the face of his niece. “I thought . . . for a time . . . that the royal line of my brother and I might end with me. My niece here has not seemed to favor any of the blue-blooded suitors that have come bearing gifts and words of undying love.”

“And hopes of Charak gold,” Farah added with a blush.

Balsora looked at Sinbad with an expectant expression. The sea captain knew what the Vizier expected of him, but he could not say it. “Melanthius was delighted with your gifts.”

Balsora shrugged. “He has no need of gold . . . so I dug through the treasure rooms here . . . some have been sealed for ages . . . and found him the Phoenician scrolls, that petrified egg of some ancient dragon, those carved stones said to have come from the Throne of Saturn . . . oh, and that mirror of Medusa, or so they say . . . they all seemed to give him pleasure and Kassim was only too happy to give them.”

Sinbad grinned and laughed. “A treasure beyond comprehension to a man such as Melanthius. He said he might spend years studying just those treasures.” The sailor looked over Balsora’s brocaded shoulder and saw Dione and Melanthius enter.

The old Greek had a new robe, but it was plain still. His daughter had discarded her homespun dress in favor of a gift from Farah, a sheer and lovely gown ornamented by jewels from the royal treasury. They came to the small group and Melanthius brought a silk-wrapped object from the folds of his robe.

“A gift for Kassim,” he said. “Perhaps you could give it to him at some quiet moment?” he asked Balsora who took it.

The silk folds slipped back and the Vizier looked at what he held. “A medal?”

Melanthius pointed to the figures engraved on one side. “An owl for wisdom, a lion for courage, a bee for industry, a dove for peace, and an eagle for majesty.” Balsora turned the coin over and Sinbad again pointed at the figures there. “And lest a future ruler forget . . . a peacock for pride, a rooster for boastfulness, a crocodile for hypocrisy, a grasshopper for irresponsibility, a mule for stubbornness . . .” He glanced sideways at Farah. “And a goat for lecherousness.”

“A fitting reminder to any king,” Balsora agreed. “But what are these symbols engraved upon the rim of the medal? They look newly cut and the medal is old.”

Melanthius nodded. “An incantation against . . . well, see? There is a tiny figure . . . a monkey . . . the symbol of trickery in the symbolic language of the alchemists. Never again can Kassim be transformed . . . he can only transform himself.”

“We all can do that,” Farah said quietly, her eyes upon Sinbad.

The sailor nodded. “Aye, but few have the will to do so.” He grinned down at her. “Some of us are amazingly lazy . . . like myself. I am what I am, no more . . . and no less.”

Balsora took a ring from his finger and pressed it into Sinbad’s hand. “One more gift . . . no, please . . . it, too, is a symbol.” Sinbad examined the gold ring and saw it held a sapphire carved into the shape of a sunburst. “A sapphire is the symbol of wisdom, my friend,” Balsora said. “May you always have the wisdom to do what is right . . . even if it hurts.”

Sinbad nodded, but before he could reply there was a blare of trumpets and all turned toward the ornate throne room doors.

Plumed guards, armored and glittering, preceded the handsome, dark-haired Kassim. He wore a jacket richly embroidered, a wide jeweled belt, flaring silken trousers, and the jewels of the heir to the Charak throne. His head was high and proud, but not so proud that he did not see Sinbad standing next to his sister.

The Crown Prince stopped the procession—much to the dismay of the dignitaries charged with the orderly proceeding of the coronation—and the nobles parted before him as he veered to come to Sinbad’s group. The bearded adventurer smiled as he gave the prince a bow of homage, but Kassim stopped him before the bow was complete.

“Not you, Sinbad. You shall not bow before me, not now, not when I am Caliph.”

“But, Your Highness—” Sinbad protested.

“No, Captain Sinbad. You have earned that honor.” He smiled. “It is not something you can spend in a tavern, nor stock a ship with . . . but it is something I give no other man.”

“As you wish, my lord,” Sinbad said. The Crown Prince reached out and seized him in a bear hug of friendship. Then he gave Dione such a look of love that all those present knew that a marriage would soon follow the coronation. Dione seemed to have eyes only for the handsome prince and her gaze followed him adoringly all the way to the throne.

Kassim turned as a cheer rose from the assembled crowd. “Allah’s blessing on Caliph Kassim!”

Balsora stepped through the nobles into the empty space before the

throne dais. The trumpets blared and everyone fell into a respectful silence. Balsora's voice boomed out over their heads.

"I, Balsora, Regent of Charak, do proclaim my nephew Kassim, Crown Prince and heir to the throne—Caliph of Charak!" His voice rang clear and strong and all the nobles cheered. Kassim sat quietly on the fantastically jeweled throne, taking the noisy tribute without expression . . . but his eyes were upon Dione.

At last he raised his hand for silence. A major-domo rang his iron staff upon the smoothed flagstone and there was silence once again.

"I, Kassim, Caliph of Charak, accept this honor." The High Priest stepped forward and placed the crown upon his head. There was still another cheer, then Kassim spoke again. "May my uncle, the Grand Vizier Balsora, live nobly until the gods decree." He held up a hand which now held the seal ring of Charak. "May peace be upon our land. May we prosper and grow old with honor and good deeds."

Kassim's dark eyes swung toward Sinbad. "And may Captain Sinbad always be my friend."

There was a cheer and the loudest came from Sinbad's half-drunk crew. Hassan could be heard to say, *sotto voce,* "It is always good to have rich friends."

Kassim waited until the cheers had died down, then he spoke again. "May Captain Sinbad live well and prosper. He is always welcome here in Charak!"

Balsora turned from looking at his nephew to smile at Sinbad and Farah. "Always . . ." he said, then turned back as Kassim spoke again.

"He has refused my offer of a palace and gold," Kassim continued and there were startled exclamations from his crew at the back of the throne room. "But one awaits him if he should ever decide to settle down. But he has said the sea is his home . . . and he has gone home . . ."

Balsora turned, "By the gods, Sinbad, you . . ." His voice trailed off. Neither Sinbad nor Farah was there. The Caliph looked around. He saw Sinbad's crew streaming out through the portals of the throne room and pushed his way through the nobles.

The men were running toward the sea. Hassan swept a woman into his arm and gave her a kiss, then released her and shouted as he ran, "Something to spoil you for other men!"

Aboo-seer threw some gold coins to a merchant and grabbed some wine bottles. Achmed pressed a coin into the hand of a butcher and took with him a roasted lamb haunch. And ahead of them, running, were Sinbad and Farah.

Balsora stepped forth. “Sinbad, I thought you were going to . . . !” He blinked, then his voice grew rough. “No, don’t take Farah with you . . . !”

But the bearded seafarer had no intention of risking Farah on a voyage into the unknown. He stopped on the quay, next to the fine new vessel he had bought with Kassim’s gold. He kissed Farah hard and long as the crew boiled aboard and began hoisting sail.

“Goodbye, Sinbad . . .” Farah said softly.

“I shall return, Princess.” He grinned. “You know I must take a share of gold to Maroofs sister and to Ali’s mother.”

“Goodbye, Sinbad . . .”

“No, Princess, only until we meet again!” He jumped from the quay to the deck of his ship as it drifted away from the dock. He turned and shouted back, “I will come again.”

“But where do you go now?”

The sailor gestured west, then south and east. “There are lands I have not seen,” he shouted.

“Nubia,” Hassan cried. “Dark wenches and golden thrones!”

“Atlantis!” cried one of the sailors. “Emeralds as big as bird’s eggs and fruit that tastes like wine!”

“The Spaniards speak of El Dorado,” Oki cried from the mast top. “Streets of gold, bricks of silver, wine bottles carved from rubies . . . !”

“India,” Aboo-seer shouted out. “Great gray beasts with tails fore and aft . . . palaces beyond description . . . dark-eyed women swathed in mist . . .”

“Simrana, and Patanga, the City of the Flame,” a sailor cried, his one earring gleaming in his ear.

“Lemuria lies west,” another man shouted over the rustle of the rising sail. “Zothique lies south, past the Dragon Sea!”

Sinbad grinned at Farah and spread his hands. “See, Princess? There are more places to explore than time!”

“But . . .”

“Aye,” cried out the sailor they had taken to replace Maroof. “Prydain . . . Dalarna . . .” His arm swept south. “Stygia . . . Kush . . . Ophir . . .” He grinned widely, his teeth white against his dusky skin. “Gryphons to fight, milady, wizards to outwit . . . !”

Sinbad jumped upon the railing and clung to a line as he shouted back at the dock where Balsora joined Farah. “We might stop again with Melanthius and take him to the ends of the Earth—!”

“Sinbad!” shouted Kassim from the steps of the city gate, his arm

around Dione. Sinbad waved at him as the ship swung into the wind.

“There are worlds to see,” Sinbad shouted as the ship came about.

“And women to please,” shouted Hassan.

Farah lifted a hand, then let it drop.

“You cannot hold the wind, daughter,” Balsora said.

“No, Father, I cannot. Nor can any woman.”

Sinbad’s ship picked up speed with the evening tide and was quickly outlined against the setting sun. Farah heard a final shout across the water but she could not make out what it was. The wind carried away the words.

“He will return,” Balsora said softly.

Farah nodded. “He will always return,” she whispered, but her words were lost in the evening wind. She watched from the quay until the ship was over the horizon, dead into the setting sun.

A gull limped across the graying sky. The water was sleek and almost oily, reflecting the crimson clouds. The waves lapped on the beach.

Then it was dark.

In the darkness by the gate stood a heavily veiled woman. Perhaps it was a flicker from the campfires that were being lit, perhaps a stray moonbeam, but her eyes above the veil seemed to glow. They were slanted, almond eyes, and they burned . . . dangerously.